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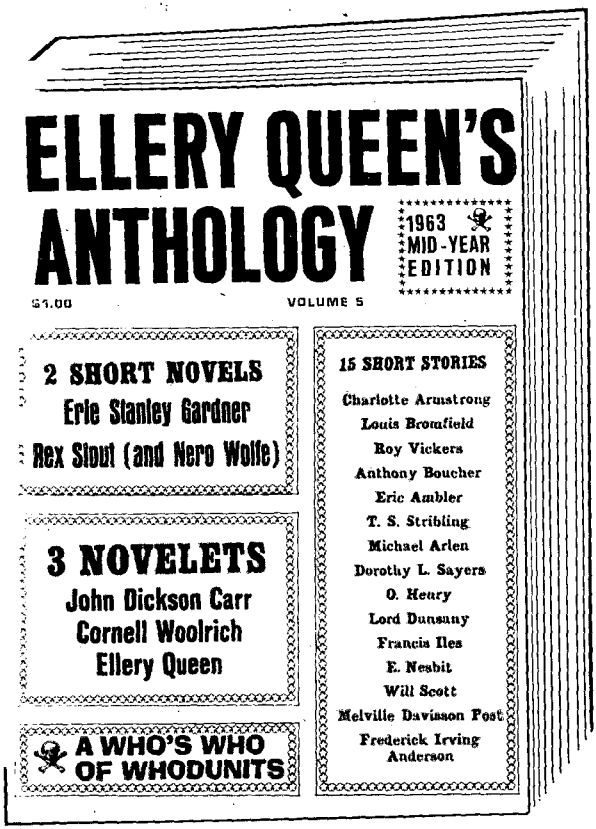

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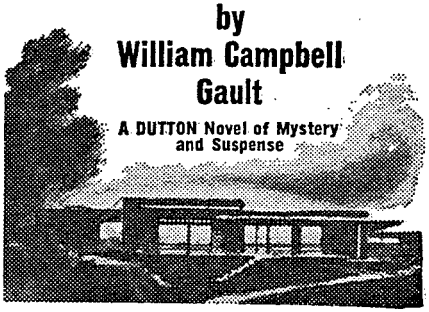

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a new story by

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AUTHOR:	**FLETCHER FLORA**
TITLE:	***Mrs. Dearly's Special Day***
TYPE:	Crime and Detection
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	The Present
COMMENTS:	*Mrs. Dearly got a special joy out of living—everything contributed to her heightened sense of excitement and exhilaration and sheer sensuous delight . . .*

AFTER WHAT HAD BEEN DONE LAST night, it was mostly a day of waiting for something to happen. Waiting, however, can be a great excitement. If one possesses the quality of character to sustain composure, the excitement all inside and growing, waiting can be the most exhilarating experience imaginable.

The day began consciously for Mrs. Dearly at exactly nine o'clock, when she wakened. She had left her windows open and the drapes drawn back before going to bed, and her room was now, at nine o'clock in the morning, full of warm and golden light. It was clearly going to be one of those andante days expiring through minutes and hours to slumberous summer sounds.

Mrs. Dearly loved that kind of day, so softly sensuous and replete with drowsy dreams, and she was aware of this one instantly in her flesh and bones. She yawned and stretched, lifting golden arms into the golden light. Looking down the length of her body, its senses astir in a sheer mist of blue nylon, she felt a kind of innocent narcissistic delight. Holding herself in child-like affection, quite uncorrupted by vanity, she was truly grateful for being what she was—so perfectly made for love and lovely things; but her gratitude was unformed and undirected, and she hadn't the faintest notion to whom it was owed, or how it might be acknowledged.

She lay in bed for perhaps another half hour, absorbing and

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transforming all the subtle manifestations of the day, and then she stretched again and got up and shed the blue mist on the way to the bathroom. It lay on the floor like something conjured out of her dreams, a giant handful of the bubble bath foam in which she soaked until ten. Returning then to the bedroom, she began to remove the bright enamel from her fingernails, and when this was accomplished she began, with equally meticulous attention, to put on another coat of enamel.

Inasmuch as the new coat was the same color and shade as the old, the effect, when she was finished, was identical with the one it replaced; but in the meanwhile she had measured the heightening of her anticipation and excitement by the precise performance of a small task that occupied her pleasantly and brought her so much closer to where the day was taking her.

It was almost noon when she was finally dressed in a tan sleeveless dress, tan stockings and shoes, and a tiny hat of deeper shade. She inspected herself in her full-length mirror with the same child-like innocence and delight with which she had looked at herself earlier in the blue mist, turning slowly now for the effect from all sides; and then, carrying her purse and a pair of white gloves, she went downstairs prepared to leave the house, going out the back way to a terrace where she expected her husband to be—and there he was, sure enough, reclining in a blue and yellow sling chair.

Mrs. Dearly crossed the terrace and kissed him lightly over one eye, patting his head at the same time with a display of that kind of affection one generally bestows on small boys and dogs.

"Good morning, dear," she said.

"Morning? In case you don't realize it, it's noon."

The words alone, unqualified by inflection, had a carping connotation; but his voice was, in fact, amused and indulgent—as if it were understood and agreed that she should be immune to the imposition and demands of time, and that it would, really, be rather absurd if she were otherwise.

"Oh, I've been up for hours," she said. "Honestly I have."

"You're dressed for the street," he said. "Where are you going?"

"I have some shopping to do downtown. Do you mind?"

"Not in the least. But don't you want some lunch before you go? I suppose it's too late for breakfast."

"I hardly ever eat breakfast, as you know, and I'll have lunch downtown. What will you do?"

"There's plenty to do in the flower beds, and I'm going to mow the grass."

"I knew it. I was looking out at the lawn last evening, and I said to myself that the grass was getting high. Cal will mow the grass tomorrow, I said."

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"You were right. That's exactly what Cal is going to do."

"You shouldn't work so hard at it, dear. Why don't you hire a gardener to do such things?"

"Because I wouldn't get any pleasure out of having a gardener do it. I enjoy doing the yard work —you know that perfectly well. All week I look forward to the weekend when I can get my green thumb into the ground. Things grow for me, and the grass somehow looks better when I mow it. I'm a frustrated horticulturist, I guess."

This was true. He had made several millions in real estate speculations, but he took more pride in his grass, his roses, his flowering and evergreen shrubs. He even had the rough look of a man who lived close to the earth. Now, on the wide terrace behind his costly house, he was wearing a coarse blue shirt tucked into worn jeans, and his shoes were the shoes of a working man, not of a dilettante gardener—thick-soled, hard-toed shoes laced up around his ankles.

Mrs. Dearly, although willing to concede something to him more numerous years—which were twenty more than her own—still felt that the addiction of a rich man to rough pursuits, like digging in the ground and mowing grass, should adhere to more fashionable lines. There was no reason, for example, why Cal couldn't work just as well in a colorful sports shirt and in presentable trousers and shoes as in the crude outfit he was now wearing. Moreover, to put it candidly, he stank. When she had bent over to kiss him and pat his head, the odor of perspiration had been strong. She could not see that it was made less offensive by being the result of earthly labor.

"Well, you must be careful of the heat," she said. "You may have a stroke or something if you're not careful."

"I'll be careful, thank you. An old fellow like me has to be, you know."

"Nonsense. You're a perennial boy. Will you look after yourself properly while I'm gone? Have a good lunch, I mean, and don't stay too long in the sun without resting."

"I'll be all right," he said. "I'm strong as a bull."

Bending to kiss him again, she thought that he not only was as strong as one, he also smelled like one.

"Goodbye, dear," she said. "I may be just a little late."

"Shall I back your car out for you?"

"Don't bother, thanks. I don't in the least mind doing it myself."

As a matter of fact, she preferred it. His handling of her beautiful little Jaguar was, she felt, a kind of physical violation only a little less disturbing than that imposed infrequently on herself. Having now evaded the former—as she did,

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whenever possible, the latter—she drove the ten or twelve miles downtown in a considerably shorter time than obedience to the speed limits would have permitted.

She loved driving fast, could not resist the sense and excitement of high speeds, and it was fortunate that she also drove expertly, with a casual mastery to which the Jaguar submitted as if it were somehow an extension of its driver. Sometimes she really felt this, especially on the highway, that she and the powerful little car were organically joined, and that it experienced in its tempered-steel body the same thrill she experienced in her soft and yielding body. This was nonsense, of course, a private fantasy, but it amused her . . .

Downtown, she parked in the Municipal Garage two levels underground and walked through a brightly lighted tunnel to an elevator that carried her up into the lobby of a hotel across the street. She was hungry by then, so she had lunch by herself in the hotel, and after eating like a bird she went to several department stores in the area where she bought a great many things, mostly personal and wearable, all of which she left in the stores for delivery. This took quite a while, lunch and shopping requiring about three hours; but the time passed agreeably and almost before she knew it, it was 3:30—which was the time she was supposed to meet Douglas.

She returned to the hotel where she had lunched, going this time to the cocktail lounge instead of the restaurant, and it was cool and seductive there, in an artificial dusk suspended mistily between light and darkness. She paused just inside the door while her eyes adjusted to the shadows, listening to the soft serenade of recorded strings and feeling her happiness and quiet excitement stir and swell inside her with an effect of almost painful pleasure; and all the while she was looking around for Douglas, and there he was, as she had hoped and expected, at a small table in a corner.

There was such a sudden sharp intensification of her pleasurable pain that she almost whimpered, and she thought at the same time, with incongruous detachment, that it was odd that he should have the capacity to make her feel that way, for he was not an exceptional young man at all. He was, in fact, rather dull at times, and incited her at once to exasperation and tenderness.

Seeing her approach, he started to rise, but she slipped so quickly into the chair across from him that he was no more than half up when she was entirely down. He resumed his seat after remaining a moment half risen, as if he were fighting an impulse to leave at once, and she took one of his hands and held it lightly on the table.

"Darling," she said, "have you been waiting long?"

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"No. Just a few minutes."

"Have you had a drink?"

"Not yet. I was waiting for you."

"That was nice of you. You are always so nice. What shall we have? Martinis?"

"I suppose so. We always do, don't we?"

He gave the order to a girl who was waiting for it, and after the Martinis had been mixed and brought, Mrs. Dearly looked at him fondly—and wondered why she was here looking at him at all. His face in repose, boyishly handsome beneath a falling lock of dark hair that seemed contrived, was like a cheap air-brush portrait by an inferior artist in which all other features were subordinated to a sulky mouth. Douglas was, in fact, an inferior artist himself, an instructor in an art school, and she had met him almost six months ago when she had gone to the school to learn to paint in water colors, for which, as she quickly learned, she had no talent whatever. This knowledge—and Douglas—were all she had acquired from the effort.

Sipping her Martini and speaking over the thin edge of glass, she said, "What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Nothing much. Nothing of consequence."

"Are you working on something remarkable?"

"I'm not working on anything at all. It's impossible."

"Darling, are you still feeling guilty about Cal? If only you could understand what a waste your guilty conscience is. You have done him no harm, and neither have I, and we have done each other a great deal of good."

"I doubt that Cal would think so."

"Oh, nonsense. Cal doesn't think about it one way or another. While you are sitting here making yourself miserable, he is at home this instant as happy as can be, digging in the flower gardens and mowing the grass."

"You make everything sound so simple and acceptable."

"Because it is. You must learn to accept things as they are and without complicating them in your mind."

"Well, it's not so easy to accept your going on indefinitely as Cal's wife."

"You must be patient, darling. Something will work out for us eventually—perhaps sooner than you think. In the meanwhile, let's have another Martini before I go."

"Why must you go so soon?"

"Something to do at home—but it's really too tiresome to talk about."

Her second Martini, which was consumed slowly to the sound of strings, proved a considerable challenge to her resolution to go home; but she went, nevertheless, about 4:30. The traffic was heavy on the streets, crippling the Jaguar, which could not get free to run until

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the last few miles—so that it was five when she pulled into the driveway behind a car which sat there, blocking the way to the garage.

Mrs. Dearly, mildly annoyed by the trespasser, got out of the Jaguar and walked around the house to the rear; but there was no sign of Cal or anyone else. She went into the house through the kitchen, and there in the hall which ran forward from the kitchen to the front entrance was a short man in a dark blue suit, a stranger with an odd little potbelly like a melon held in position by his belt; and this man had obviously come out of the living room to meet her, as if he had become, by some strange trickery in her absence, the master of the house and she the stranger.

"Mrs. Dearly?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "Who are you?"

"My name is Dickson. Police."

"Police? What on earth are you doing here? Where is my husband?"

"You had better talk with Lieutenant Hardy about that. He's waiting for you in the living room."

He half turned and gestured toward a doorway, still with that curious implication of inviting her to be his guest. She walked past him into the living room, where another man was standing in the middle of the room with his back to a bank of windows bright with the late afternoon sun. He was even shorter than the man who had called himself Dickson—a thin, consumptive-looking man of indeterminate age in a wilted seersucker suit.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Dearly," he said. His voice was as wilted as his suit, and perfectly supplemented by a languid, hesitant gesture of his right hand, its middle and index fingers stained by the smoke of countless cigarettes. "I'm Lieutenant Hardy. Sorry to intrude."

The apology was hollow, a mere concession to form. For a moment Mrs. Dearly had a terrifying feeling of helplessness, of being swept into a play of forces she could not control, and at whatever cost she was compelled to assert herself in a way that would restore her position and assurance.

"Your car is blocking the drive," she said. "Please be good enough to move it."

"Certainly." His right hand moved again, seeming to gather in Dickson. "Go move the car, Dickson, and drive Mrs. Dearly's back to the garage."

"The key is in the ignition," Mrs. Dearly said. "Have you ever driven a Jaguar?"

"I'll figure it out," Dickson said.

He went out, and Mrs. Dearly turned back to Hardy.

"Perhaps now, Lieutenant, you'll explain why you are here. And I would like to see my husband, if you don't mind."

"I'm afraid that's impossible. He isn't here."

"Where is he? Has something happened to him? Tell me at once."

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"I had hoped to break it to you a little more gently, but I see that I can't. The fact is, your husband is dead."

"Dead? Did you say—dead?"

She moved to a chair and sat down with an effect of excessive care, as if moving and sitting had become all of a sudden a precarious business. She sat erect in the chair, her back unsupported, her eyes staring past Hardy through a bright pane of glass behind him into the side yard beyond the drive.

She was oddly sensitive in that moment to the details of sight and sound, and she noticed that the yard had been partly mowed, the power mower standing at rest on the clean line dividing the clipped and shaggy grass. She heard the rich roar, quickly reduced, of the Jaguar in the drive.

"Are you all right?" Hardy said.

"Yes, thank you. I'm quite all right."

"Would you like me to tell you about it?"

"I think you had better."

"Well, there isn't much to tell, when you come right down to it. Our only witness is your neighbor on the west, Mr. Winslow, and he didn't really see anything much. He was upstairs in a room on the second floor of his house this afternoon about two or two thirty, he couldn't be exact, and he looked out the window and saw your husband reclining in one of those canvas sling chairs on your rear terrace. He said your husband had been mowing the grass, and Winslow assumed, naturally, that he had merely taken a break to rest and cool off, which was probably true. It's been a pretty hot day, as you know.

"Anyhow, Winslow happened to look out the window again about twenty minutes later, and your husband was no longer in the sling chair. He was lying on his face on the terrace. Apparently he had stood up, taken a step or two, and collapsed. Winslow was alarmed, as you might expect, and he hurried over. To put it bluntly, if you will excuse me, your husband was dead. Before dying, he had been very ill. To his stomach, I mean."

Hardy stopped, watching Mrs. Dearly, and Mrs. Dearly continued to stare through the bright glass into the bright yard. Her face in profile was beautiful and composed. It was almost, Hardy thought, serene. Being basically an old-fashioned man, he found an old-fashioned simile in his head: *she has a face like a cameo,* he thought.

"I've warned him and warned him about it," she said at last.

"About what, Mrs. Dearly?"

"Working so hard in the hot sun. He loved working in the yard, you know, and he insisted on spending practically every week-end at it. Sometimes, whenever he could, week days also. He was getting too old for such work, especially in the

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hot sun. He had a stroke, I guess. A heat stroke or something. Doesn't someone with a heat stroke become violently ill to his stomach?"

"I think so. I'm not sure about it."

"Where is my husband now? His body, I mean. And why are the police involved? Is it normal for the police to be involved in such a matter?"

"We were called by the doctor who was summoned by Mr. Winslow."

"Why should the doctor call the police?"

"He thought it wise, considering the circumstances of the death. He was not prepared to certify the cause without an autopsy."

"An autopsy? Is that where Cal is? Have you taken him away somewhere for an autopsy?"

"Yes. Sorry. We tried to locate you, but we couldn't."

"Can you perform an autopsy on my husband without my permission?"

"If you want to make an issue of it, we can get an order. But it would be much better if you would simply agree. I don't see why you shouldn't."

"Since you will obviously do it in any event, I might just as well agree. You are right, anyway. There is no reason why I shouldn't."

"Thank you. The body will be returned to you as soon as possible." He paused for a moment, apparently trying to put in order the words to express properly what needed to be said. "I must say that I admire the way you are taking this. I was afraid it might be an ordeal."

She turned her face toward him then, lighted by the sun on one side and softened by shadows on the other. Her lips assumed the shape of the merest smile.

"I'm not the hysterical type, Lieutenant. I suppose I'm a bit numb, really. I can hardly believe that Cal is dead. It's often that way when someone dies suddenly, isn't it? Later it will strike me fully and all at once."

"Will you be all right here alone? It's a large house, but apparently there are no servants around."

"We have a cook and a housekeeper, but they were given the week-end off. Cal and I were on our own for two days."

"Too bad. If someone had been around, something might have been done in time to save him."

"Yes. Poor Cal. Dying alone like that. I think, Lieutenant, if you don't mind, that I would like to go upstairs. Is there anything more you want of me?"

"No. I'm finished here. I can't tell you how sorry I am that we had to intrude this way."

"Not at all. Under the circumstances, as you said, there was nothing else you could do."

"You're gracious to say so. Goodbye, Mrs. Dearly."

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"Goodbye, Lieutenant. Please find your own way out."

"Yes. Of course."

He looked thin and worn, almost ravaged, in his wilted seersucker. His right hand moved again in that hesitant gesture as he turned and went out of the room.

Standing quite still, listening, Mrs. Dearly heard his steps receding in the hall, then the front door closing behind him. She continued to stand there, listening intently. She had heard the movements of the police car and the Jaguar in the drive, and now, after several minutes, she heard the police car in the street, its engine starting and the swiftly diminishing sound of it as it sped away.

The silence of the house gathered around her, and she turned in silence and went through the hall into the kitchen and downstairs from the kitchen into the basement. She walked directly to the wall to her left, the wall toward the side yard where the power mower stood at rest between the clipped and shaggy grass; and she was just reaching overhead for the circular handle of a valve when someone spoke behind her.

"I don't believe I'd do that if I were you, Mrs. Dearly," the voice said.

How strange it was! she thought afterward. Following the first moment of terror, when her breath stopped and her heart withered, she was immediately calm and lucid and without any fear whatever. She thought clearly before turning around that Douglas must surely be kept a secret now, however difficult it might be, for he would be considered a motive at the very least, if not a conspirator—and the funny thing about it was that Douglas was not a motive at all, but only a kind of fringe benefit.

"I thought you had gone, Lieutenant," she said.

"Dickson went," he said. "As for me, I must confess to intruding again. I came in through the basement window there."

He walked over and stood beside her, looking up at the valve she had intended to turn. To the right of the valve, slanting down toward the basement floor, were about six feet of pipe that made a right turn, by means of an elbow joint, and passed through the concrete foundation.

The Lieutenant began again. "While I was waiting for you to come home this afternoon from wherever you were, I got to wondering how your husband might have been poisoned—*if* he was poisoned, which was at least a possibility. In a container of something to drink, perhaps? In something he ate, perhaps? But that would have been dangerous, and foolishly so. The container to be analyzed. The remains of the food, ditto. Then I walked along the side of the house, and I noticed that the ground under the outside faucet

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was damp—and it came to me. What does the kind of man who loves working in the yard, as your husband did, almost invariably do when he gets hot and thirsty? He takes a drink from the outside faucet. Usually from his cupped hands. That's what your husband did, Mrs. Dearly, and that's what you *knew* he would do."

The Lieutenant paused, still staring up at the valve with an expression of admiration, almost of wonder. Perhaps he was waiting for Mrs. Dearly to speak, but at the moment Mrs. Dearly did not feel like speaking.

"It was clever," he went on. "You're a clever woman, Mrs. Dearly. Between that inside valve and the outside faucet there are six feet of one-inch pipe. It was almost perfect for your purpose, wasn't it? A perfect container. First, you closed the inside valve and drained the six feet of pipe. This you did merely by opening the outside faucet, letting the water in the pipe flow out, then closing the faucet afterward. Then, with a wrench, you disconnected the six feet of pipe below the valve and put into the pipe, your perfect container, whatever you used to kill your husband. This done, you reconnected the pipe to the valve, opening the valve to let water run through and fill the pipe. By closing the valve after the pipe was filled, you had a deadly liquid ready to run from the outside faucet whenever it was opened.

"It wouldn't run long or as freely as it would have run with the valve open, of course, for six feet of one-inch pipe will hold by my arithmetic only about one quart of water. But that was enough. It was sufficient to give your husband a long, fatal drink. And now you have come down here to open the valve again and to flush from the pipe what may be left of the poison. What kind of poison did you use, Mrs. Dearly? Well, never mind. I don't expect you to tell me. Something nearly tasteless, of course, and soluble in water. We'll find out."

Mrs. Dearly sighed and dusted her hands by brushing them softly together. She was feeling positively exhilarated.

"It is not I who is clever, Lieutenant," she said. "It's you. What you have said is logical and rather convincing, I'm sure, but it is only a theory, and it will be quite exciting to see if you can prove it or not."

But Mrs. Dearly's exhilaration was only that of excitement, no more. The Lieutenant had no difficulty proving his theory—there was enough poison left in the pipe, and it wasn't long before they found Douglas . . .

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***a new novelet by* AVRAM DAVIDSON**

This story has a curious history. It gave your Editors what might be called "the daisy petals"—did we like it, did we not . . .

Obviously, the last daisy petal said "yes" to us, but whatever the last petal may indicate for you, this is an important story. It has something important to say, something that should be said, something that we should all listen to . . .

BLOOD MONEY

by AVRAM DAVIDSON

IT WAS SHORTLY BEFORE FIVE o'clock on the afternoon of August 10th (the hottest August 10th in 86 years, the newspapers pointed out helpfully) that Charley Rosco saw, and at once recognized, Ben Lomax.

For three days in a row the heat had been killing; the plant wasn't air-conditioned (what laundry ever was?), and each day fewer and fewer employees had turned up for work. Some had taken their cars and headed for cooler climate, others sought refuge in deliciously chill bars or movie houses, others simply stayed at home and drank cold bottles from the refrigerator and turned the fans up.

As a result, Charley had little to deliver that day. He had a private hospital and two nursing homes on his route, and by pleading "Emergency" to Max White, the foreman, had managed to get most of their linen finished. After delivering that, only a few bundles remained in his truck. Most of these, he found, belonged to customers who had evidently also fled the sweating little city.

So he had nothing to do, really; by one o'clock he could have gone home. If his car had been in good repair—but it wasn't. Marie, his wife, didn't take the heat too well—it made her cross, and when Marie was cross with anything, Marie was cross with everything.

So Charley did something he almost never did: he goldbricked. He thought of it in exactly that term, and thought, too, that it had been a long time since he'd heard anybody use the word.

Anyway, he parked the laundry truck in an alley, gathered up the few bundles, and went around the corner to a bar. He made two bottles of beer last over three hours as he

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watched TV and joined in the conversation. It was all very pleasant, and he hated to leave.

Charley saw the man bent over the motor of the car, hood up, when he was driving back to the laundry. Sympathetic, remembering his own out-of-commission automobile, he slowed down as he came abreast of it, with some thought of stopping and offering help. The man lifted his head, and Charley, incredulous, recognized him instantly.

The man's hair was matted with sweat—not neatly combed back, as in the pictures—and his hairline mustache was almost obliterated in stubble: but it was him. There was no doubt about it. It was Ben Lomax.

The man wiped his wet face with a grease-smeared arm, bent over the engine again immediately. Obviously he hadn't realized he'd been spotted. Charley Rosco, his heart thumping queerly, drove on, wondering what to do. And as he drove he saw another laundry truck ahead of him. This had to belong to Lew Livingston, whose route adjoined his own.

Charley blew his horn, waved Lew over to the curb, jumped out of his truck, and ran up to him.

Lew was a stocky sort of fellow, with a seamed face. If Charley ever got sorry for himself thinking over his own domestic troubles, he thought about Lew's problems, and his own went away.

"Listen," he said, panting a little bit.

"Whaddaya holding me *up* for, Charley? I gotta get back to the *plant!*"

"Listen, Lew—back there on Hargraves, near Poplar—there's a guy trying to fix a car. I'm sure he's Ben Lomax. Y' know—?"

For a moment Lew continued to scowl irritably. Then he made a long face, pushing out his mouth. "Benny the *Bar*ber? The—the bank robber?" Charley nodded quickly. "You sure?"

"Lew, I'm *sure*. What should I do, Lew? Huh? What's your idea?"

Livingston didn't hesitate. "*My* idea? Call the cops! Let *them* handle it. He killed a guy, that last bank he robbed, didn't he? So let the cops take the risk. They get paid for it!"

A sudden idea seemed to strike Lew. He pulled his head back into the truck, turned the truck ponderously around, stuck his head out again.

"Stay here, Charley," he said. "I'm gonna take a little ride—see if he's still there, see if it's really him . . . Wait here."

What with the beer, the heat, and the excitement, Charley Rosco didn't feel like moving, much, anyway. He stood in the shade of his truck and fanned himself with a bundle of laundry tickets. He had never taken any part in having anyone arrested, and he felt somewhat uncertain about the whole thing.

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Charley Rosco had some vague idea that it would go like this: Lew Livingston returning, followed by several squad cars. *You positive it's Benny the Barber?* the cops ask. *Absolutely,* says Charley. The cops exchange glances. *Benny's a hard man,* one of them says. *And a dangerous one,* the other says. They reflect. *Tell ya what we're gonna do,* one says at last. *You*—addressing Charley—*you park your truck across the road at Linden.* The cop turns to Lew Livingston. *You do the same at Poplar. That'll cut that block on Hargraves completely off, so he won't be able to make a getaway in his car. You're not scared, are you?* the cop asks. Lew snorts. *I'm not afraid a nothing,* he says, tough. Charley's reply has more dignity. *I know my duty as a cit—*

Charley looked up, his train of thought abruptly cut. Lew was back. Alone. He seemed annoyed.

"The cops picked him up," he said.

"Then it *was* him?"

"How do *I* know? Think I tagged along? You crazy? I watched from two blocks away, through my rear mirror. They picked him up and they left his junk-heap sitting there in the street." Lew hesitated, seemed about to say something else. He shook his head instead. Then he muttered, "Gotta get back to the damn *plant,*" and was off.

After a moment's confused thought, Charley followed him.

After he got home and took a shower, he was about to tell his wife. But Marie put an envelope in front of him, then busied herself setting supper—cold cuts, pickles, delicatessen potato salad, iced tea—from commercially bottled concentrate—and supermarket cake. It had been too hot for cooking. Charley picked up the envelope, addressed in his daughter's not-yet-firm script, and took the letter out.

Dear Mommy and Dady,

We went swiming and baoting today it was lovely Johnny was bad

your loveing daugter
Jeanette

Underneath, in a string of wild print, up hill and down dale: *Lier i was not Dear Momm and Dad ples send me dolar love Joh*

A wormlike squiggle at the margin evidently did duty for the missing terminal. Charley said, "What the heck, they're supposed to go swimming and boating *every* day, aren't they?"

"They do," Marie said, "but she loves it so much she just has to mention it."

Her husband nodded. By severe saving and self-denial, and by borrowing on their insurance policies, they had managed to send both children to summer camp for the first time. Thinking of this made Charley think of something else.

"Uncle Eddie Aurelius in town today?" he asked. She nodded. It was her uncle who, by agreeing to

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take a second mortgage, had enabled them to buy the house: Uncle Eddie Aurelius, so-called to distinguish him from Uncle Eddie Jackson, who didn't have a button to his name. "What did he say?"

"He said not to worry about it."

The little knot in Charley's stomach went away. He reached for a slice of head-cheese, dropped it, smacked his forehead.

"It's those screens," Marie said hopelessly. "The mosquitoes—"

"No, no! Listen, Marie, what do you think happened today?" And he told her.

When he was finished she said very quietly, "Are you crazy? Are you out of your mind?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Why did you have to tell *Lew* anything? Why did you need *Lew?* You could have told the police yourself."

"I don't get you, Marie. What difference—"

"Charley. Are you the only person in town who doesn't know that there's a $10,000 reward out for Benny Lomax?"

Charley gaped. After a moment he said, "I forgot. Would you believe it? I forgot all about it. Yeah, I did know, but I—"

"Well, you can be sure Lew *Liv*ingston didn't forget. You notice how quick he went to the police without coming back for you?"

Reflecting, Charley did notice. The more he thought, the more he thought he saw.

"The devil with it!" he said abruptly. "If that's what he wanted —the reward—he can have it. You think I'd touch it?"

"Listen here!" Marie's voice went shrill. "Don't be so generous! *'He* can have it'? *Oh,* no—"

Charley slammed his hand on the table. *"Shut up!"* His own voice went shrill. "You realize they could send this guy to the electric chair? How do you suppose I'm going to feel if that happens? If I'd stopped to think about it this afternoon, maybe I never would have done it. I never had anybody's blood on my hands before! What do I need it for now?"

Very quietly she said, "He killed a man. If he wasn't captured, maybe he would've killed a lot more."

Her husband nodded. His fingers played with a piece of bread. "Okay," he said after a moment. "Granted. I *should* have turned him in. It was my duty as a citizen. Okay. I had to do it. But I don't have to take blood money. Oh," he went on, speaking more quickly, "I know what you're going to say. There are so many things we could do with the money. There always is. The house. The kids. Sure. Suppose I take it. I pay off what we owe. I buy a piano. I buy bikes. And then one of the other kids says, 'You bought this piano with blood money. They electrocuted a man so your dad could get the money for that bike.' Huh? Sure they would. You know that."

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Marie looked down. Charley continued, "What am I breaking my back for, carrying bundles of laundry up and down stairs—just to keep a roof over their heads, just to send them to camp? *Marie!* I am trying," he said doggedly, hitting each word hard, "I am trying to raise them up, and so are you, to be honest people. To know that you just don't do something *just* to get money. That if a person can't get money in a good and honest way, then they do without the money, and what it can buy. I—"

His voice choked. Very gently Marie said, "Eat your supper." And he knew he had won.

It was after he finished the iced tea that he reflected, aloud, that he still didn't know, after all, if the man *was* Ben Lomax. Call the police, Marie said. And so he did.

"Headquarters, Sergeant Callan speaking."

"Say . . . This fellow you picked up on Hargraves Street a little after five—is he Ben Lomax, or isn't he?"

There was a pause. Then Sergeant Callan said, "Who is this? Who are—who wants to know, huh?"

Confused, annoyed, and with the average man's almost instinctive reluctance to give his name to the police, Charley asked, "What difference does it make, who? All I want—"

The voice of Sergeant Callan, which had kept caution for its main note, now became openly hostile, "Yeah? Well, don't worry about it!" the Sergeant snapped, and hung up.

"They must of thought I was one of his gangster pals," he told Marie. Later it occurred to him that perhaps the man had turned out not to be Lomax after all, and that the police were too embarrased to discuss it. He was wrong, of course, on both counts.

As he found out the next afternoon.

Lew Livingston, face inflamed with sun and rage, came over to him, half on the run, waving a newspaper, shouting as he came.

"You *see* this? Charley! You see the paper? Those dirty, rotten—" His voice went on and on.

Charley took the local paper, tried to concentrate. There it was. The same picture of Lomax, neat and slick, that the papers and television and reward posters had featured; next to it the picture of the man as he had been when Charley saw him—dirty, stubble-faced.

And the headline read: *CITY POLICE TAKE BANK ROBBER.*

Ben ("Benny the Barber") Lomax, whose successful $50,000 hold-up of the Second National Bank last month resulted in the death of bank guard Frank Foster, was captured here yesterday. Arrest was made by Patrolmen Thomas V. Colcott and Edgar Trapp. The keen-eyed police officers . . .

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After that everything moved so fast that Charley, afterward, was not so clear about the details. Lew was loud and outraged, Max White the foreman came out to protest. It was still hot, the plant was steamy, Charley went to get a drink of water, but even the water was almost hot, it seemed. A picture came to him of Benny the Barber being led to execution, the grease from the motor of his car still there on his forehead where Charley had seen him wipe it.

He tried to obliterate the picture with another—of Frank Foster, the bank guard, struggling to rise from the pool of his own blood. Foster had been shot in the stomach, and Charley remembered that long ago he'd heard that this was the most painful kind of gunshot wound. In the Army they'd said that a man with a gunshot wound there should never be given anything to drink—no, no matter how much he begged for it, screamed for it . . .

He was still thirsty. The water had a coppery taste to it. He took his lips away from the tiny bubble of water . . . There was a reporter. Max had called him. Charley told him the story, then Lew—calmer now, though not by much—told him his.

"You two better go with him," Max said. "What do you mean, your deliveries?" he said fretfully to Charley's low-keyed protests. "Those few bundles? The route man will take care of them, and take care of Lew's, too. Go on."

First they went to the editor of the paper. He called the Commissioner, the Commissioner called the Chief of Police. Then they were all in the Commissioner's office—Charley, Lew, the reporter, the Commissioner, the Chief, and the two cops, Colcott and Trapp.

Trapp brazened it out all the way, but Colcott got confused. It didn't take long before the Chief got him to admit he'd been lying. What was the idea? the Chief demanded. How come they tried to file a false report?

Sweating copiously, standing on one foot, then the other, Colcott said, "Yeah, but Chief, all right, I agree—"

"*You* agree! Thanks a lot!"

"Yeah, but Chief, me and Syd, Patrolman Trapp, I mean, uh, *we* took the risks. Right? *You* know, a guy like that, a hood like The Barber, it was just luck he wasn't armed, but *we* didn't know that, we took the risk he could of shot us both, maybe, like Foster—"

"Will you for crysake get to the *point?*"

Trapp, blank-faced, but with a note of something close to contempt in his voice, said, "The point is the reward, Chief."

Then:

Lew: "There! You heard him! Did you hear—"

Reporter: "Now we're getting some place!"

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Chief: "*What* reward, you blockhead?"

And the Commissioner, lips compressed to a thin line, moist hands folded across his bulging, translucent shirt, nodded his head.

"Now listen," said the Commissioner. "Everybody. Okay?" Everybody listened. "All right. Too hot to shout. Now. The policy of this department, like the policy of most other departments of public safety, is that police don't collect rewards. Right, Chief?"

The Chief nodded. Once.

"The reason is," the Commissioner went on patiently, "that they cannot take outside money when the City is paying them. See? You took a risk? Correct. That's your job. If you hadn't tried to make monkeys out of the Chief and me, maybe we would've seen to it you got a department medal." Trapp's mouth went ugly. "In fact, if I'm not mistaken, the *courts* have held that a peace officer isn't entitled to a reward for an arrest made in his own jurisdiction. You go to the beach, you pick up somebody there and turn him in to the local authorities like any private citizen, you collect the reward. If there *is* one. But for any arrests you make here, or any information you give here, you don't collect a reward."

"Charley and me collect it," Lew said.

The Commissioner's face showed a degree of annoyance, very quickly concealed. Lew, after all, was a citizen, residing locally, and might possess a large family of actual or future voters.

"I trust you may, Mr. Livingston," he said. "I sincerely hope that you and Mr. Rosco will collect the reward. I'm sure you deserve it. But let's not be premature." The smile left Lew's face. "The reward money was put up, as you probably know," the Commissioner continued, "partly by the bank, partly by the County Bankers' Association, partly by the newspaper and the Chamber of Commerce, and the rest was contributed by private citizens. *Now,*" he said briskly, as Lew began to become restless, "the reward was offered in the usual terms—'for information leading to the arrest and conviction of Ben Lomax, alias Benny the Barber,' and so on. He's been arrested. But he hasn't even been indicted, let alone brought to trial and convicted."

Lew gaped, showing the backs of his teeth. He seemed shocked. The Commissioner got up, shook hands with him and Charley and the reporter. "Public-spirited citizens and an example to everyone," he said. Then he asked them to excuse him, as he and the Chief had some official business to conduct. His eyes rested on the two policemen. Their eyes did not rest on him. Colcott looked at the floor; Trapp looked, first at Lew Livingston, then at Charley. Hot as the air in the office was, Charley felt the coldness

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of that look, and wondered at it, but not for long.

The reporter's questions made him forget Patrolman Trapp.

"What are you planning to do with your shares of the reward," the reporter asked.

"That's *my* business," said Lew, automatically truculent. He had sense enough to amend his words at once, "I mean, I dunno exactly what my plans are, as yet. Let's not be premature," he concluded, his words a forlorn echo of the Commissioner's.

The reporter then put the same question to Charley. The answer was almost whispered.

"What did you say?"

Louder, but still low: "I wouldn't touch it."

Nor would Charley elaborate. Lew, for once, had nothing to say. He seemed in a reverie.

Charley's refusal to explain was not allowed to stand. And so, later, he got the reporter off his back by making a short statement:

"My only reason for reporting Lomax was my fear that he was capable of killing more people"—so ran the polished, published version of Charley Rosco's faltering words. "I did my duty as a citizen, and not for a reward. Lomax's fate is up to the jury. He will probably be sentenced to death, or at least to life imprisonment. I couldn't accept any money for that." He thought that only his mind had repeated the words, blood money; but there they were in the newspaper. *It would be blood money.*

The account held a further surprise for him. *Lewis Livingston, who joined Rosco in reporting the killer's whereabout to police, concurred in his coworker's decision.* Somehow, Charley thought he would not want to talk to Lew about it.

Other people wanted to talk to Charley about it, though.

Patrolman Colcott: "Well, I guess you got the right idea. I thought you was trying to beat us out of the money, was all. To tell you the truth, just in confidence, it wasn't my idea to put in that report. But I got, like, carried away, you know? It was somebody else's idea. The Commissioner, he really threw the book at us. But I got to admire you for sticking by your principles."

Jeanette Rosco: "'Oh I was so exitted when I read the nespaper clipings and shoewed them to everybody in Camp and Ant Sussan our cownsiler said your father is not only breave he is ethicle to and I was so prowed.'"

Uncle Eddie Aurelius: "Well, Marie, that's quite a guy you married. But me, I'd think twice before turning that much money down."

John Rosco: "'Dadd he shut any bulits at you Ples send me a suvenir of the robbery alll the gys say you are rite its blod money.'"

And so, finally, Lew.

"I don't know what got inta me, Charley. I just kept thinking of all

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the things I could do with the money—I didn't even think of it as $5,000, just the whole amount. I mean, to get so carried away that I didn't even think of *sharing* it!"

"You couldn't share it with *me,* Lew. Far as I'm concerned, you can have the whole amount."

"Ah, no. Ah, no. No blood money for me. I put the whole thing out of my mind. Hey—you know—I was talking to one of my customers, name of Bergdol, I think he must change his tablecloths after every damn *meal*—half his wash is tablecloths! Well, so he says, Lomax got off with, what was it? $73,000? Besides those other jobs he pulled. So he can *afford* the best criminal lawyer, Bergdol says, and maybe he can get a hung jury or a, whaddayacallit, a mistrial. After all, it's been *done*. But that's not *all*: Bergdol says he could do it again, with a big lawyer, even a second trial. Fix the jury, maybe.

"Well—"

Lew, carried away by Mr. Bergdol's fancies, swept on. "So if he does it *twice,* Charley, maybe gets a reversal or one of them legal things, and the government or the D.A. figures, What the *hell*. How much is this going to *cost*? So they wait til everybody's forgot about it and they let him go. Happened *before*. So—bloong!—there goes your reward. Huh? So I put the whole thing outa my mind."

But Charley couldn't put it out of his.

Whatever the sum of money was that Ben Lomax—he had, for one brief fortnight, fifteen years before, been a student at a barber college, which was enough for an imaginative reporter to tag him "Benny the Barber"—had made off with, none of it remained with him. Not one of Mr. Bergdol's high-flying conceits was realized. Lomax was defended by a court-appointed lawyer, who used no histrionics, no movie or television techniques, baffled no witnesses, found no legal loopholes, demanded no mistrial.

In his summing-up he reminded the jury that although the defendant had been convicted of bank robbery twice before, he had never been accused of violence against any of his victims, and this, the attorney said, lent credence to the defendant's claim that he had not intended even to fire his gun during the commission of the crime he was now charged with; that it had gone off by accident. Therefore, even if the jury should find the defendant guilty of first degree murder, they would have ample grounds to make a recommendation for mercy.

The jury was out two hours and brought in a verdict of guilty of murder in the first degree. There was no recommendation of mercy.

Lomax said he hoped his case would be a lesson to young people everywhere to "keep clean." He did not elaborate.

The judge confined his words to

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the legal formula of the sentence itself.

"We will appeal," said the condemned man's lawyer. "Of course we will appeal."

He did not bother to point out that one appeal was mandatory—and free. After that, the condemned man might appeal, of course, as many times as he could pay for. As he could not pay for any, there was no reason to believe that he would not be executed in the briefest time that the ponderous progress of the law allowed.

"Well, what do you think about it?" everybody—it seemed like everybody—asked Charley. He said that he didn't want to think about it. But that night he dreamed about it. Once again he saw Ben Lomax, grease-smeared, led to execution; once again Frank Foster lay writhing in his life's blood.

But this time there was something else: he, the dreamer, was compelled to look at his own hands. Unwillingly, in fear and trembling, he finally looked. His relief at finding them clean of any trace of blood was so great that he awoke.

The local newspaper carried an editorial which briefly reviewed Lomax's crime, his trial, and its own role in setting up the reward. The editorial went on to say, "That it is entirely proper for such rewards to be offered, goes without saying. Nevertheless, public opinion has not always been kind to those who have accepted them. It was the hope of a reward, not civic consciousness, which brought about the downfall of Jesse James, as cold-blooded a killer and thief who ever lived. It is ironic that the bandit himself has been glorified by those who should know better, while Robert Ford, who shot him, has gone down in popular history as 'a dirty little coward.'

"No such stigma can be placed on two local men whose prompt, courageous actions resulted in the career of a latter-day Jesse James being brought to an end. Charles Rosco and Lewis Livingston deserve the plaudits of their fellow-citizens. They did what decent men should do, and they staunchly refuse any reward for having done so. What a lesson their brave, selfless conduct should be to those, alas, too many, who are always seeking handouts."

And the editorial concluded with a denunciation of subsidized medical care for the aged.

Charley's children (now back from camp with summer's end) returned from school with shining eyes and flushed cheeks to report that their teachers had read the editorial aloud in class, and that the principal had made it the subject of an address during assembly.

"All right. This is what your mother and I always try to teach you," Charley said. "You do the right thing because it *is* the right thing. And if you know that it's wrong to take money for some-

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thing, well, you don't take it, even though you might need it, for instance," he wound up—somewhat confused, not being used to moralizing. And the two children listened to him, soberly, intently, without wriggling.

Strangers stopped him in the street to shake his hand.

Lomax's appeal for a new trial was refused by the court. Another date was set for the execution of the death sentence. His lawyer, occupied with a trial for embezzlement, said he could not discuss plans for another appeal. Professional etiquette prevented his asking, "Who's going to pay for it?" Only action by the Governor could prevent a certain electrician, name never mentioned—thus giving the impression that it was not a man, but some impersonal force—from earning his fee of $250 for killing Lomax. And there was no reason to expect the Governor to act.

And then, one evening, Lew Livingston visited the Rosco home. Marie set out coffee and crackers, apologizing for there being no cake. "How is Clara?" she asked.

Lew made a gesture which almost upset the coffee.

"It's not Clara," he said, answering, not Marie's question, but some question unasked outside of his own mind. "It's her old lady."

"Mrs. Barnett is sick?"

"Sick in the *head!*" said Lew in a rush of words. He hesitated, then let it all come out.

"The old lady gets up at six in the morning and turns on the television. She sits and she looks at the college professor—don't ask *me* what the hell she understands—she just sits and looks. She watches all the programs for the little kids who aren't even old enough to go to school, she— Listen." Lew's mouth worked, his hands moved, before he could catch hold of his words. "All day long, from six in the morning until whenever the Late Late Show goes off, the old lady sits in the living room and watches the television.

"She *eats* in front of the television, Clara has to bring it to her. She's hard o' hearing, so she keeps it up high. Her eyes aren't too good, so it's focused just right for *her,* which means it's blurred for everybody else. You dasn't turn it down for even a minute, you dasn't focus out the blue even for a minute, you dasn't try and watch another program even for a minute—and, Charley, lemme tell *you,* may heaven help you if you try to turn that damn box *off* for even so much as *half* a minute!"

Charley and Marie made sympathetic noises. This was not news.

"I'm going outa my *mind,*" Lew said, holding his head as if only the pressure of his hands could keep the skull from falling into two separate parts.

"But that's not the worse," he went on. "Ohmi*god,* that's bad enough, because what can ya *do?*

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You try to fix the television any way but the way she wants it and she carries on. She screams, she yells, she grabs my hands. What can ya *do?* The kid gives me a hard time, but can I hit an old lady? They'd put me in jail. We have company in the house, we hafta have'm in the kitchen.

"But that's not the worse of it . . ." He paused, and the furrows in his long face deepened in misery. "The kid is fourteen years old now. But she's, uh, well, she could pass for seventeen, eighteen, easy. The kids nowadays, they seem to grow up like mushrooms, you know? Overnight.

"She sleeps in the same bedroom with the old lady. Tiny little room, two beds, one dresser. *Our* bedroom, Clara's and mine, the same size. But suppose she wants to bring in a friend? Where's she going to go? Entertain anybody in the same room where that loud, blurry set is blasting away? She going to entertain her friends in the kitchen?" Lew's eyes were bloodshot.

"When she was little and she had a girl friend, so they went and sat on her bed together. But she ain't little any more . . . What's the result? The result is she's hardly ever at home any more. She says she's with this friend, with that friend, at their house, and they do their homework together. Maybe so. But *—all the time?* Charley, she's a pretty girl, the boys all like her, she likes them. Not the ones her own age, a boy fourteen years old doesn't have a car—"

Marie sighed deeply, nodding.

Abruptly Lew said, "So I'm taking my share."

After a second Charley asked, "Your share of *what?*" And almost instantly understood.

"With $5,000," Lew said, nodding his head as he spoke, "I can put another room on the house. The kid can have a decent room of her own to fix up. Move her bed out of the old lady's room and I can move that damn television set *and* the old lady *in. She* won't care. Then the kid can have her friends in, with the living room to themselves, and Clara and me can sit in the kitchen—what the hell?—but keep an eye on things, you know . . ."

His voice died away.

"It's up to you," Charley said.

"Maybe you don't know how easy it is for a girl to get in with the wrong crowd, your kids are too young, but if you were in *my* shoes you'd do just what I'm doing—take the money, put on the extra room, and have your kid stay around the house instead of going off who knows where and doing who knows what with a bunch of wild kids older than her."

"It's up to you," Charley repeated.

"She looks like sixteen or seventeen, see, but she's only got the sense of her own age, only fourteen—"

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"Lew," said Charley slowly and stiffly, "for the last time—it's up to you."

Lew relaxed. "Then you agree, huh? It's all right, then. We take the money."

The stiffness left Charley in an instant. "'*We*'? There isn't going to be any *we* about it! You want the damned money, you take it. That's your privilege. I wouldn't touch it with a—"

Lew bounded to his feet, his face convulsed. "So you're still on your high horse, huh? You're gonna leave me take the dirty looks and the wisecracks all by myself! *You*'re gonna be the good one, huh, and I'm gonna be the bad one, huh? What makes you so high-class? When did you become a preacher, Rosco? 'Rosco'? *That*'s a laugh, all by itself. My old man knew your grandfather when he couldn't speak six words of English. *His* name wasn't no *Rosco!* Rocco—that's what it was, *Rocco!* And you—"

Charley got up and Marie quickly ran between the two of them and grabbed her husband's arm.

"Get out of here," he said. "Get out, Lew—"

"Wait," said Lew as he left. "*You wait!*"

They heard him drive away. Then Marie said bitterly, "That's a nice enemy you found for yourself."

"*I* found?" He stared at her. She met his eyes defiantly. He yelled. "You know what that money is? It's the price of Frank Foster's blood!" He pounded on the table. "Did anybody give Frank Foster's widow $5,000?"

"That has nothing to do with it," she yelled back. And then they shouted at each other, neither hearing the other, till they suddenly fell silent on seeing the children at the door of their room—open-mouthed, astonished, all set to whimper.

Charley turned on his heel and walked out.

Next morning, Max White, the foreman said, "Boss wants to see you, Charley?" And he repeated it, assuring him it was no joke.

So Charley made a brief trip to the washroom and then passed through the outer office, where he almost never went, into the outer office, where he had absolutely never gone before.

He could remember quite well when old Mr. Damrosch had not been old, had been in the full flower of vigorous late middle-age. Mr. Damrosch had not been seen too often around the plant in those days; he had let his brother-in-law, Mr. Cooper, stay in the office while he himself had spent long, long vacations in Saratoga Springs, Daytona Beach, Bermuda, and similar places. But Mr. Cooper was dead, the laundry business was not what it was, and although he still wore spats and a flower in his buttonhole, Mr. Damrosch nowadays

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stayed on hand most of the year—"Minding the stoor," as he put it.

He looked very natty this morning. And very old.

"The fact of the matter is, Charles," he said, as if continuing a discussion only recently interrupted, "that this business is not growing." He waved his hand: he had conceded a point, but it was not, the gesture said, a very important point. "But on the other hand," he stroked his neat white mustache, "on the other hand, neither is it shrinking. Not any more. Not for the past few years. You've noticed that. Everybody who wants a washing machine has got one. Everybody who prefers a laundromat goes to one. We have leveled off, you see. We have a sound business here, a very sound business.

"The hospitals and nursing homes are not going to go out of business, and neither are they going to make the tremendous investment of putting in their own laundries, having to hire extra help, and so on. Not worth it. No, sir. Neither will our linen supply customers go out of business. As long as hair grows, people will need barbers, barbers will need towels, jackets, and so on. Hotels—"

He leaned forward as if something had just occurred to him. "And I tell you *what!*" he said. "I shouldn't be surprised to see, oh, any number of *mo*tels opening up on the outskirts when this new highway they're talking about goes through! And why shouldn't *we* get some of those, eh?—some of their business. No reason why old Ben Steinberg should be allowed to get it all, eh, Charles?" And as he mentioned the name of the owner of his chief competitor, the old man quirked one side of his mouth. Charley recognized a Traditional Joke, and smiled.

"Well, I don't mind saying, Mr. Damrosch—" Mr. Damrosch nodded his head rapidly and encouragingly, as if he very much wanted to hear what Charley didn't mind saying. "—that if any of these new motels should happen to be opened on my route, well, it would certainly be very welcome."

Almost before Charley had finished the old man began to talk. "Oh, you can do better than *that,* Charles," he said, almost reproachfully. "You can certainly do better than *that.* Sure . . . We can do better than that for you."

"What do you mean, Mr. Damrosch?"

Mr. Damrosch opened his humidor, took out a cigar which certainly had never come from Havana, and offered it to Charley, who declined. The old man lit the cigar with deliberation, and puffed. Then he said, "You know this has always been a family-owned corporation, Charles. Stock has never been available to the general public. *But*—" His voice took the last word on a rising note, and he cocked his head and looked at the

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smoke. "The Cooper Estate is willing, for the first time, to make some of its shares of stock available." The Cooper Estate, as everyone knew, consisted of Mr. Damrosch's niece, her son, and her third husband. The old man himself, a widower, was childless.

"There have been certain expenses which have to be met rather quickly." He gestured again. Details, details, the gesture said—unimportant details. "I have a certain say in the matter, and *I* say—" his eyelids, coming down, emphasized his words. "*I* say, Charles, I do not want this stock to fall into the hands of outsiders, new faces with unfamiliar ways." He paused. "I want *you* to be the one to take it. Don't disappoint me, Charles."

Charley swallowed. "*I* don't have any money, Mr. Damrosch. Just my salary."

The old man's eyes, hand, mouth, cigar, signified: An acceptable gambit. One which need not, however, detain us very long.

"For five thousand dollars, Charles," said Mr. Damrosch, "you can secure a nice little block of stock in the firm for which you have worked all these years. Which has given you the possibility of maintaining your family. You realize, Charles, this would, in effect, make you my partner. How about that?"

"I don't have $5,000."

The old man smiled. "Oh, I understand . . . You'd like a little cash, a nice roll of bills, to play around with, eh? Only natural. Get the wife, the kiddies, some presents. Go away to a decent place on your vacation. *I* understand. I'm with you. I can swing it. I'll tell Lundquist—you know Harmon Lundquist, he was poor old Joe Cooper's lawyer—I'll just tell him that he will have to modify his demands. Forty-five hundred, I'll say, is the most you can offer. Or," he looked sharply up, as Charley still said nothing, "four thousand. He'll have to sit still for it. That will give you a thousand to play with, and you'll have four thousand dollars worth of stock in the plant to sock away till your kids are ready to go to college. *Plus* the div-i-dends, Charles. *Plus* the div-i-dends."

Speaking rather more loudly than he intended, Charley said, "I just don't *have* that kind of money, Mr. Damrosch!"

"Oh," said the old man softly, "*but you can get it.* All you have to do is pick up the telephone. Eh?"

"Lew Livingston can do that if he wants to. Not me."

The old man asked him if he'd prefer if *he,* Mr. Damrosch, did the telephoning? He could take care of everything. He could promise that nothing would even appear in the newspaper.

"No."

Suddenly the old man became pathetic. He slumped. They were coming at him like lions, he said, like wild lions. Money—that was

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all they wanted. His own flesh and blood. They wanted to give the business away to strangers. He'd bought stock from them—and bought again, when they wanted more. But he couldn't go on buying it, could he? He simply didn't have that much capital any more. He looked up, pleading.

"No," Charley said. He wondered if Mr. Damrosch had approached Lew and been turned down. Probably.

Mr. Damrosch shook his head. He seemed crushed. Then, very slowly, still shaking his head, he straightened up. "I'm older, a lot older than you, Charles," he said, "I've seen more of this rotten world than you, and I'll tell you what, Charles, I'll tell you this: *money never stinks*."

But still Charley shook his head.

Mr. Damrosch sighed. "Well, you'd better get back to your route," he said. "If you see Freddy Choynsky outside, send him in. He's been hanging around, asking for a route. There's none open, but—well, I don't know, maybe we can find one, somehow."

Charley didn't need to have this spelled out for him. Fear, anger, despair . . . "Freddy Choynsky?" he said. "Didn't you say, when you fired him that last time, that you couldn't stand to see his face around?"

The old man's hooded eyes held him fast.

"Well . . ." the old man said deliberately, "maybe I could learn to . . ."

When he got home that evening Charley found Uncle Eddie Aurelius there.

"Look who's here," said Marie brightly, with a tight smile. "Uncle Eddie came in especially to see you." Her eyes and mouth sent him an unmistakable message.

Uncle Eddie Aurelius was a keg-shaped little man, with no neck and no hair, snapping blue eyes, and a cauliflower ear.

"You going to stop this nonsense?" he demanded.

Charley felt very tired. "How about some coffee, Marie?" he asked.

"You listen to what Uncle Eddie has to say," she said implacably.

What Uncle Eddie had to say was to recount, omitting no detail, the story of how he was asked to take the second mortgage in order to enable the Roscos to get their house; of what Charley had said, of what Marie had said, of what Aunt Loraine (Mrs. Uncle Eddie) had said, and, finally, what he, Eddie Aurelius had said. He then reminded them of each and every time a payment had been late and of what he had said on each occasion, having invariably been understanding and magnanimous.

"I know, Uncle Eddie. I *know*. You been very, very—"

"I've been very, very kind," the uncle snapped. "I know I have. I

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haven't pressed you. Am I a bloodsucker? I'm no bloodsucker. You are into me for plenty of money. Do you think I'm a millionaire? Well, I'm not, kiddo—get that idea out of your soft head right now. Long as I knew you didn't *have* the money," he said, "long as I knew you couldn't *get* the money, I was willing to wait. But why in the hell should I wait now, when all you got to do is just pick up the phone and *ask* for the money?"

Charley said, "I can't."

"Oh, yes, you can," snapped Uncle Eddie, quick and fierce. "Oh, yes, you can. And you will, too. You want to be a hero? Not on *my* money, sonny, you're not going to be any hero. Listen. *I* wouldn't put you out of the house. Couldn't do it. But if I don't get the money owing to me, the money that's coming to me, I'm going to drop the whole thing. Sell out. Turn the mortgage over to a mortgage company. You think *they* will let you wait like I done? Ho *ho*. That dirty dog up there in the State pen, you think he's going to be grateful to you for not picking up the check?" He snorted, sought Marie's eyes.

She began to cry.

Charley threw back his head, spread his arms. He struck the table with his clenched fist. He seemed to be striking it into a pool of blood. Deeper and deeper his fist went into the blood. He sobbed. He sat and looked at his hands.

Then he walked over and picked up the telephone.

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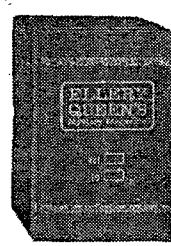

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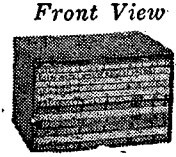

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**AGATHA CHRISTIE**
TITLE:	***The Regent's Court Murder***
TYPE:	Detective Story
DETECTIVE:	Hercule Poirot
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	A generation ago
COMMENTS:	*The victim, an Italian count, was obviously an orderly man; and just as obviously, the murderer was a man of method . . . but, of course, so was Hercule Poirot.*

POIROT AND I HAD MANY FRIENDS and acquaintances of a rather informal nature. Among these was Dr. Hawker, a near neighbor of ours, and a member of the medical profession. It was the genial doctor's habit to drop in sometimes of an evening and have a chat with Poirot, of whose genius he was an ardent admirer.

On one particular evening in early June he arrived about half-past eight and settled down to a comfortable discussion on the cheery topic of the prevalence of arsenical poisoning in crimes. It must have been about a quarter of an hour later when the door of our sitting room flew open, and a distracted female rushed in.

"Oh, Doctor, you're wanted! Such a terrible voice. It gave me a turn, it did indeed."

I recognized in our new visitor Dr. Hawker's housekeeper, Miss Rider. The doctor was a bachelor, and lived in a gloomy old house a few streets away. The usual placid Miss Rider was now in a state bordering on incoherence.

"What terrible voice? Who is it, and what's the trouble?"

"It was the telephone, Doctor. I answered it—and a voice spoke. 'Help,' it said. 'Doctor—help. They've killed me!' Then it sort of

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trailed away. 'Who's speaking?' I said. 'Who's speaking?' Then I got a reply, just a whisper, it seemed, 'Foscatine'—something like that—'Regent's Court.'"

The doctor uttered an exclamation.

"Count Foscatini. He has a flat in Regent's Court. I must go at once. What can have happened?"

"A patient of yours?" asked Poirot.

"I attended him for some slight ailment a few weeks ago. An Italian, but he speaks English perfectly. Well, I must wish you good night, Monsieur Poirot, unless—" He hesitated.

"I perceive the thought in your mind," said Poirot, smiling. "I shall be delighted to accompany you. Hastings, run down and get hold of a taxi."

Taxis always make themselves sought for when one is particularly pressed for time, but I captured one at last, and we were soon bowling along in the direction of Regent's Park. Regent's Court was a new block of flats, situated just off St. John's Wood Road. They had only recently been built, and contained the latest service devices.

There was no one in the hall. The doctor pressed the elevator bell impatiently, and when the elevator arrived, he questioned the uniformed attendant sharply.

"Flat 11. Count Foscatini. There's been an accident there, I understand."

The man stared at him.

"First I've heard of it. Mr. Graves—that's Count Foscatini's man—went out about half an hour ago, and he said nothing."

"Is the Count alone in the flat?"

"No, sir, he's got two gentlemen dining with him."

"What are they like?" I asked eagerly.

We were in the elevator now, ascending rapidly to the second floor, on which Flat 11 was situated.

"I didn't see them myself, sir, but I understand they were foreign gentlemen."

He pulled back the iron door and we stepped out on the landing. Number 11 was opposite us. The doctor rang the bell. There was no reply, and we could hear no sound from within.

The doctor rang again and again; we could hear the bell trilling inside, but no sign of life rewarded us.

"This is getting serious," muttered the doctor. He turned to the attendant.

"Is there a passkey to this door?"

"There is one in the porter's office downstairs."

"Get it, then, and, look here, I think you'd better send for the police."

Poirot approved with a nod of the head.

The man returned shortly; with him came the manager.

"Will you tell me, gentlemen, what is the meaning of all this?"

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"Certainly. I received a telephone message from Count Foscatini stating that he had beeen attacked and was dying. You can understand that we must lose no time—if we are not already too late."

The manager produced the key without more ado, and we all entered the flat.

We passed first into a small square lounge hall. A door on the right of it was half open. The manager indicated it with a nod.

"The dining room."

Dr. Hawker led the way. We followed close on his heels. As we entered the room I gave a gasp. The round table in the center bore the remains of a meal; three chairs were pushed back, as though their occupants had just risen. In the corner, to the right of the fireplace, was a big writing table, and sitting at it was a man—or what had been a man.

His right hand still grasped the base of the telephone, but he had fallen forward, struck down from behind by a terrific blow on the head. The weapon was not far to seek. A marble statuette stood where it had been hurriedly put down, the base of it stained with blood.

The doctor's examination did not take a minute. "Stone-dead. Must have been almost instantaneous. I wonder he even managed to telephone. It will be better not to move him until the police arrive."

On the manager's suggestion we searched the flat, but the result was a foregone conclusion. It was not likely that the murderers would be there when all they had to do was to walk out.

We came back to the dining room. Poirot had not accompanied us in our tour. I found him studying the center table with close attention. It was a well-polished round mahogany table. A bowl of roses decorated the center, and white lace mats reposed on the gleaming surface. There was a dish of fruit, but the three dessert plates were untouched. There were three coffee cups with remains of coffee in them —two black, one with milk. All three men had taken port, and the decanter, half full, stood before the center plate. One of the men had smoked a cigar, the other two cigarettes. A tortoiseshell-and-silver box, holding cigars and cigarettes, stood open on the table.

I enumerated all these facts to myself, but I was forced to admit that they did not shed any brilliant light on the situation. I wondered what Poirot saw in them to make him so intent. I asked him.

"Mon ami," he replied, "you miss the point. I am looking for something that I do *not* see."

"What is that?"

"A mistake—even a little mistake —on the part of the murderer."

He stepped swiftly to the small adjoining kitchen, looked in, and shook his head.

"Monsieur," he said to the mana-

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ger, "explain to me, please, your system of serving meals here."

The manager stepped to a small hatch in the wall.

"This is the service lift," he explained. "It runs to the kitchens at the top of the building. You order through this telephone, and the dishes are sent down in the lift, one course at a time. The dirty plates and dishes are sent up in the same manner. No domestic worries, you understand, and at the same time you avoid the wearying monotony of always dining in a restaurant."

Poirot nodded. "Then the plates and dishes that were used tonight are on high in the kitchen. You permit that I mount there?"

"Oh, certainly, if you like. Roberts, the lift man, will take you up and introduce you; but I'm afraid you won't find anything that's of any use. They're handling hundreds of plates and dishes, and they'll be all lumped together."

Poirot remained firm, however, and together we visited the kitchens and questioned the man who had taken the order from Flat 11.

"The order was given from the à la carte menu—for three," he explained. "Soup Julienne, filet de sole Normande, tournedos of beef, and a rice soufflé. What time? Just about eight o'clock, I should say. No, I'm afraid the plates and dishes have been all washed up by now. Unfortunate. You were thinking of fingerprints, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," said Poirot, with an enigmatical smile. "I am more interested in Count Foscatini's appetite. Did he partake of every dish?"

"Yes, but of course I can't say how much of each he ate. The plates were all soiled, and the dishes empty—that is to say, with the exception of the rice soufflé. There was a fair amount of that left."

"Ah!" said Poirot.

As we descended to the flat again he remarked in a low tone, "We have decidedly to do with a man of method."

"Do you mean the murderer, or Count Foscatini?"

"The latter was undoubtedly an orderly gentleman. After imploring help and announcing his approaching demise, he carefully hung up the telephone receiver."

I stared at Poirot. His words now and his recent inquiries gave me the glimmering of an idea.

"You suspect poison?" I breathed. "The blow on the head was a blind."

Poirot merely smiled.

We re-entered the flat to find that the local Inspector of Police had arrived with two constables. He was inclined to resent our appearance, but Poirot calmed him with the mention of our Scotland Yard friend, Inspector Japp, and we were accorded a grudging permission to remain. It was a lucky thing we were, for we had not been back five minutes before an agitated middle-aged man came rushing into the

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room with every appearance of grief and agitation.

This was Graves, valet-butler to the late Count Foscatini. The story he had to tell was a sensational one.

On the previous morning two gentlemen had called to see his master. They were Italians, and the elder of the two, a man of about forty, gave his name as Signor Ascanio. The younger was a well-dressed lad of about twenty-four.

Count Foscatini was evidently prepared for their visit and immediately sent Graves out on some trivial errand. Here the man paused and hesitated in his story. In the end, however, he admitted that, curious as to the purport of the interview, he had not obeyed immediately, but had lingered about endeavoring to hear something of what was going on.

The conversation was carried on in so low a tone that he was not as successful as he had hoped; but he gathered enough to make it clear that some kind of monetary proposition was being discussed, and that the basis of it was a threat. The discussion was anything but amicable.

In the end, Count Foscatini raised his voice slightly, and the listener heard these words clearly: "I have no time to argue further now, gentlemen. If you will dine with me tomorrow night at eight o'clock, we will resume the discussion."

Afraid of being discovered listening, Graves had then hurried out to do his master's errand. This evening the two men had arrived punctually at eight. During dinner they had talked of different matters —politics, the weather, and the theatrical world. When Graves had placed the port on the table and brought in the coffee his master told him that he might have the evening off.

"Was that a usual proceeding when he had guests?" asked the Inspector.

"No, sir, it wasn't. That's what made me think it must be business of a very unusual kind."

That finished Graves' story. He had gone out about 8:30, and, meeting a friend, had accompanied him to the Metropolitan Music Hall in Edgware Road.

Nobody had seen the two men leave, but the time of the murder was fixed clearly at 8:47. A small clock on the writing table had been swept off by Foscatini's arm, and had stopped at that hour, which agreed with Miss Rider's telephone summons.

The police surgeon had made his examination of the body, and it was now lying on the couch. I saw the face for the first time—olive complexion, long nose, luxuriant black mustache, and full red lips drawn back from dazzlingly white teeth. Not altogether a pleasant face.

"Well," said the Inspector, closing his notebook. "The case seems clear enough. The only difficulty will be to lay our hands on this Signor

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Ascanio. I suppose his address is not in the dead man's pocketbook by any chance?"

As Poirot had said, the late Foscatini was an orderly man. Neatly written in small, precise handwriting was the inscription, *Signor Paolo Ascanio, Grosvenor Hotel.*

The Inspector busied himself with the telephone, then turned to us with a grin.

"Just in time. Our fine gentleman was off to catch the boat train to the Continent. Well, gentlemen, that's about all we can do here. It's a bad business, but straightforward enough. One of these Italian vendetta things, as likely as not."

Thus airily dismissed, we found our way downstairs. Dr. Hawker was full of excitement.

"Like the beginning of a novel, eh? Real exciting stuff. Wouldn't believe it if you read about it."

Poirot did not speak. He was very thoughtful. All evening he had hardly opened his lips.

"What says the master detective, eh?" asked Hawker, clapping him on the back. "Nothing to work your gray cells over this time."

"You think not?"

"What could there be?"

"Well, there is the window."

"The window? But it was fastened. Nobody could have got in or out that way. I noticed it especially."

"And why were you able to notice it?"

The doctor looked puzzled. Poirot hastened to explain.

"It is to the curtains I refer. They were not drawn. A little odd, that. And then there was the coffee. It was very black coffee."

"Well, what of it?"

"Very black," repeated Poirot. "In conjunction with that let us remember that very little of the rice soufflé was eaten, and we get—what?"

"Moonshine," laughed the doctor. "You're pulling my leg."

"Never do I pull the leg. Hastings here knows that I am perfectly serious."

"I don't know what you are getting at, all the same," I confessed. "You don't suspect the manservant, do you? He might have been in with the Italians and put some dope in the coffee. I suppose they'll test his alibi?"

"Without doubt, my friend, but it is the alibi of Signor Ascanio that interests me."

"You think he has an alibi?"

"That is just what worries me. I have no doubt that we shall soon be enlightened on that point."

The *Daily News* enabled us to become conversant with succeeding events.

Signor Ascanio was arrested and charged with the murder of Count Foscatini. When arrested, he denied knowing the Count, and declared he had never been near Regent's Court either on the evening of the crime or on the previous morning. The younger man had disappeared entirely. Signor Ascanio had arrived alone at the Grosvenor Hotel

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from the Continent two days before the murder. All efforts to trace the second man failed.

Ascanio, however, was not sent for trial. No less a personage than the Italian Ambassador himself came forward and testified at the police court proceedings that Ascanio had been with him at the Embassy from eight till nine that evening. The prisoner was discharged. Naturally, a lot of people thought that the crime was a political one, and was being deliberately hushed up.

Poirot had taken a keen interest in all these proceedings. Nevertheless, I was somewhat surprised when he suddenly informed me one morning that he was expecting a visitor at eleven o'clock, and that that visitor was none other than Ascanio himself.

"He wishes to consult you?"

"*Du tout,* Hastings. I wish to consult him."

"What about?"

"The Regent's Court murder."

"You are going to prove that he did it?"

"A man cannot be tried twice for murder, Hastings. Endeavor to have the common sense. Ah, that is his ring."

A few minutes later Signor Ascanio was ushered in—a small, thin man with a secretive and furtive glance in his eyes. He remained standing, darting suspicious glances from one to the other of us.

"Monsieur Poirot?"

My little friend tapped himself gently on the chest.

"Be seated, Signor Ascanio. You received my note. I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. In some small measure you can aid me. Let us commence. You—in company with a friend—visited the late Count Foscatini on the morning of Tuesday the 9th—"

The Italian gestured angrily.

"I did nothing of the sort. I have sworn in court—"

"*Précisement*—and I have a little idea that you have sworn falsely."

"You threaten me? Bah! I have nothing to fear from you. I have been acquitted."

"Exactly. And as I am not an imbecile, it is not with the gallows I threaten you—but with publicity. Publicity! I see that you do not like the word. I had an idea that you would not. My little ideas, you know, they are very valuable to me. Come, Signor, your only chance is to be frank with me. I do not ask to know whose indiscretions brought you to England. I know this much, you came for the special purpose of seeing Count Foscatini."

"He was not a count," growled the Italian.

"I have already noted the fact that his name does not appear in the Almanach de Gotha. Never mind, the title of count is often useful in the profession of blackmailing."

"I suppose I might as well be frank. You seem to know a good deal."

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"I have employed my gray cells to some advantage. Come, Signor Ascanio, you visited the dead man on the Tuesday morning—that is so, is it not?"

"Yes, but I never went there on the following evening. There was no need. I will tell you all. Certain information concerning a man of great position in Italy had come into this scoundrel's possession. He demanded a big sum of money in return for the papers. I came over to England to arrange the matter. I called on him by appointment that morning. One of the young secretaries of the Embassy was with me. The Count was more reasonable than I had hoped, although even then the sum of money I paid him was a huge one."

"Pardon, how was it paid?"

"In Italian notes of comparatively small denomination. I paid over the money then and there. He handed me the incriminating papers. I never saw him again."

"Why did you not say all this when you were arrested?"

"In my delicate position I was forced to deny any association with the man."

"And how do you account for the events of the evening, then?"

"I can only think that someone must have deliberately impersonated me. I understand that no money was found in the flat."

Poirot looked at him and shook his head.

"Strange," he murmured. "We all have the little gray cells. And so few of us know how to use them. Good morning, Signor Ascanio. I believe your story. It is very much as I had imagined. But I had to make sure."

After bowing his guest out, Poirot returned to his armchair and smiled at me.

"Let us hear M. le Capitaine Hastings on the case?"

"Well, I suppose Ascanio is right—somebody impersonated him."

"Never, never will you use the brains the good God has given you. Recall to yourself some words I uttered after leaving the flat that night. I referred to the window curtains not being drawn. We are in the month of June. It is still light at eight o'clock. The light is failing by half-past. *Ca vous dit quelque chose?* I perceive a struggling impression that you will arrive some day. Now let us continue. The coffee was, as I said, very black. Count Foscatini's teeth were magnificently white. Coffee stains the teeth. We reason from that that Count Foscatini did not drink any coffee. Yet there was coffee in all three cups. Why should anyone pretend Count Foscatini had drunk coffee when he had not done so?"

I shook my head, utterly bewildered.

"Come, I will help you. What evidence have we that Ascanio and his friend, or two men posing as them, ever came to the flat that night? Nobody saw them go in; nobody saw them go out. We have the evi-

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dence of one man and of a host of inanimate objects."

"You mean?"

"I mean knives and forks and plates and empty dishes. Ah, but it was a clever idea. Graves is a thief and a scoundrel, but what a man of method! He overhears a portion of the conversation in the morning, enough to realize that Ascanio will be in an awkward position to defend himself. The following evening, about eight o'clock, he tells his master he is wanted at the telephone. Foscatini sits down, stretches out his hand to the telephone, and from behind Graves strikes him down with the marble figure.

"Then quickly to the service telephone—dinner for three! It comes, he lays the table, dirties the plates, knives, and forks. But he has to get rid of the food too. Not only is he a man of brain; he has a resolute and capacious stomach; but after eating three tournedos, the rice soufflé is too much for him! He even smokes a cigar and two cigarettes to carry out the illusion. Ah, but it was magnificently thorough!

"Then, having moved the hands of the clock ahead to 8:47, he smashes and stops it. The one thing he does not do is to draw the curtains. But if there had been a real dinner party the curtains would have been drawn as soon as the light began to fail.

"Finally he hurries out, mentioning the guests to the lift man in passing. He hurries to a telephone box, and as near as possible to 8:47 rings up the doctor with his master's dying cry. So successful is his idea that no one ever inquires if a call was put through from Flat 11 at that time."

"Except Hercule Poirot, I suppose?" I said sarcastically.

"Not even Hercule Poirot," said my friend, with a smile. "I am about to inquire now. I had to prove my point to you first. But you will see, I shall be right; and then Japp, to whom I have already given a hint, will be able to arrest the respectable Graves. I wonder how much of the money he has spent . . ."

Poirot *was* right. He always is, confound him!

★ ★ ★

NEXT MONTH . . .

***NEW* novelets and short stories including**

HUGH PENTECOST's *In the Middle of Nowhere*

MICHAEL GILBERT's *Melodrama in Three Acts*

VICTOR CANNING's *Flint's Diamonds*

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **RICHARD O. LEWIS**

TITLE: ***The Man Who Counted His Blessings***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *Albert Harwick was a human adding machine, an animated computer. Now, when such a man plans to commit murder . . .*

AT PRECISELY 7:30, A.M., THE FRONT door of the little white house with the green trim popped open and Albert popped out.

He wore a brown business suit, a round hat with a little green-and-bronze feather in it, and he carried a brief case. His round cheeks were scrubbed to almost apple-brightness.

He took a quick appraisal of his surroundings. There were three fleecy clouds—he counted them—in the sky above, and there were eight pine shrubs on the front lawn, the same number of shrubs that had been there for the past ten years.

His short legs carried him along the walk from the house and down the cement steps—six of them—to the level of the sidewalk where he turned right. After traversing nearly a half block, he did a little skippety-hop, then continued on his way.

A neighbor who had moved into the area only a scant month before had observed Albert's little skippety-hop for several mornings in succession and had finally gone down to the sidewalk to investigate the cause of the apparent stumble. After three investigations on as many mornings, the neighbor had finally come to the conclusion that the stumbling block was definitely not on the sidewalk, that it was located somewhere in Albert's head.

And, in a way, he was right, for in addition to being very precise and methodical in his habits, Al-

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bert was a "counter." On his morning walk to the bus stop he always counted the number of steps in series of twenty-five, and at the end of each twenty-fifth step he always did a little skippety-hop before picking up the rhythm for the next series of twenty-five.

He didn't count because he wanted to know how many there were of everything; he counted merely to keep certain perplexities of his personal, pointless life from crowding into his brain. It was a habit he had fallen into after the second year of his marriage.

On this particular morning Albert had nearly finished his third series of twenty-five when a man on a bicycle, approaching rapidly from behind, breezed past him and dropped something on the sidewalk just ahead of Albert.

"Hello!" Albert called. "Hello there! You dropped something!"

But the man sped on without looking back.

Eleven and one-half paces farther along, Albert stooped and picked up the package. It was a small one, securely tied. He looked up again, but the cyclist had vanished around the next corner.

Albert hesitated a moment, then placed the little package under his arm and continued walking and counting. There seemed little else he could do at the moment.

The bus was precisely on time, and Albert counted the number of people aboard as he made his way to a rear seat. There he inspected the package more closely. It was wrapped in clean, brown paper and tied with thin but strong cord. There was no address on it, no stamps, no markings of any kind. He put it to his ear, listened, shook it unobtrusively, and listened again. Hearing nothing inside, he finally placed it in his brief case.

There was the usual morning business at Albert's insurance office—letters to be read and answered, adjustments to be considered and rendered or revised, leads to follow—and he got it all under way or finished before lunch hour.

When he was first married, there had been a time when he had been out of the office constantly on the trail of new business. He had had a dream, then—of children, a happy home . . .

But the dream had quickly faded. There were no children, his home had been anything but a happy one, and no matter how hard he worked, he never seemed quite able to please his wife. And so, after setting up his own office and finding his life still empty, he had drifted into a personal limbo where he had surrounded himself with a certain nothingness—except, of course, counting.

Immediately after a hasty lunch Albert returned directly to his office, placed the package on the desk, and wondered what he should do with it.

He considered placing an adver-

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tisement in the newspaper. The owner could claim the package by paying for the ad and describing the contents . . .

He discarded the idea even before elaborating it. Maybe the contents were worthless. In that case, the owner wouldn't bother about it, and he, Albert, would be stuck with the cost of the ad.

He drummed his fingertips on the top of the desk while counting up to twenty-five twice, and then reached a decision. He would open the package. If there were something of value inside, he would simply wait for the owner to advertise.

He undid the string deftly and removed the wrapper, bringing to light a small cardboard box. Carefully he lifted the lid and pulled out a protective layer of cotton. Inside, each separately wrapped, were four small vials. He lifted one out by its plastic cap of blue. It was nearly full of a colorless liquid, and pasted lengthwise on the tiny square bottle was a label bearing the single word, *Strychnine,* followed by the numeral, 2.

He removed the other three bottles. Each bore the label, *Strychnine,* and they were numbered *1, 3,* and *4.* He stood them on his desk in numerical order and counted them automatically. One. Two. Three. Four.

From somewhere in the vast storehouse of miscellaneous facts which Albert had accumulated in his brain came the knowledge that anyone buying such a poison had to state the reason for the purchase and, in some manner, register his name. This should solve the problem of ownership: all he had to do was to find the name of the pharmacist.

He emptied the rest of the cotton from the box and searched carefully. There was no bill of sale, no name of a pharmacist—nothing.

He sat back in his chair, folded his hands over his brown vest, contemplated the bottles, and counted them again.

He was certain now that the poison had been purchased in some illegal manner—and for some illegal purpose. Otherwise, there certainly would have been an identification of some kind—or at least a poison warning.

"But what would anyone want with *that much poison?*" he asked himself. He had formed the habit of talking to himself when alone—except for business purposes, it was about the only opportunity he had for conversation. "There's enough here to kill at least a dozen people!"

He tried to remember what the man on the bicycle had looked like: Tan shirt? Delivery boy's cap? But if the poison were bought illegally, why would it be delivered?

He shook his head. "Maybe it wasn't being delivered," he told himself. "Maybe the fellow is a nut of some kind who wants to kill all the dogs in his area. With the aid

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of his bicycle and a quantity of meat scraps he could do it in short order. One-eighth grain of the poison would take care of a dog easily. Maybe he wore the delivery cap as a disguise . . ."

Albert broke off his private conversation abruptly. One-eighth grain? Now where did he pick up that information?

Then a thought that had been knocking at the back of Albert's brain broke through. Dr. Berrington!

A week or so ago, Albert's wife had had one of her rather frequent heart palpitations and had told him to summon her doctor. Dr. Berrington arrived in record time and quickly administered a bit of strychnine to her on a spoonful of sugar. Within a few minutes she had begun to revive.

"One-eighth grain of this poison will kill a dog, and a full grain will kill a man," Dr. Berrington had explained to Albert. "Yet, taken in doses of one-sixteenth grain, it acts as a stimulant to humans and is quite beneficial in heart cases."

Albert had nodded. It had seemed the only thing to do at that time.

"Strange thing about this drug, however," the doctor had continued, as if struggling to strike up a conversation, "If given repeatedly, the body builds up a tolerance, and the dosage must be gradually increased to maintain its effectiveness."

Albert had wanted to say something. But he couldn't get his thoughts collected—the art of conversation had long been dormant in him, and it was hard to break old habits.

The doctor had continued his professional explanation. "If a person increased the dosage daily for, say, five or six weeks, the body would accept a truly lethal dose without detrimental effects . . ."

But failing in his attempt to reach the taciturn Albert, Dr. Berrington had finally folded his black bag, as the Arabs do their tents, and as silently taken his leave . . .

Albert leaned forward to drum on the desk again with his fingertips. Consciously, he counted up to twenty-five, but subconsciously the ghost of a plan was beginning to materialize.

If a person could build up a sufficient tolerance . . .

The sound of his secretary entering the outer office at the end of her lunch period interrupted him. He reached forward quickly and pressed a switch on the intercom.

"Yes, Mr. Harwick?"

"Miss Parsons, I'll be very busy for at least an hour. See that I'm not disturbed."

He contemplated the row of bottles again and counted them three times.

They were small and made of thick glass. They probably held only a few grains each. "But there should be enough." He was talking

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to himself again, in tones less than a whisper. "I could use an eye-dropper. One drop would be approximately one grain. Mix that with fifteen drops of water, then one drop of that solution on a bit of sugar would be a one-sixteenth grain dose!" He rubbed his hands together and bounced up and down in his chair. He counted the bounces.

"Now, let's see . . ." He flicked over several pages of the desk calendar. "Hmm. Five or six weeks . . . Oh, sure! Our wedding anniversary! And in just six weeks!" In his exuberance he nearly spoke aloud.

Albert always took his wife out to dine on their wedding anniversary, then gave her a present of some kind as a surprise. He didn't take her out because he wanted to, of course. It had merely become a sort of annual tradition, and it was easier to go along with it than to try to break it and explain why.

He moved the first bottle a little to the left of the others. "This one should last for the first three weeks." He moved the second over next to it. "With the increase in dosage, this should last two weeks. The third one—" he slid it over "—will do for one week. Six weeks in all!" The fourth one he pushed farther away from the others. "And this one will be the big after-dinner surprise."

Albert felt an elation of spirit he had not known for ten years. Perhaps, after he got rid of her, life would once again have some meaning for him.

But the plan had to be flawless, and before another half hour had passed, Albert felt reasonably certain he had all the details worked out satisfactorily.

At the anniversary dinner when the opportunity presented itself, he would simply pour a drop or two from the fourth bottle onto her dessert and a drop onto his own. Within a few minutes she would go into a spasm while his body was taking the dose in stride. And during the confusion he would wipe his prints from the bottle, take hold of her hand, press her fingerprints on the bottle, then slip the bottle into her purse.

And the beauty of it was, there would be no way whatsoever to trace the poison to him. An investigation would undoubtedly be made, the bottle would be found in her purse, and the judgment rendered would be attempted murder and suicide on the part of the deceased—motivated, no doubt, by her chronic ill health.

"And they'll believe," Albert whispered to himself, "that she probably stole the poison from Dr. Berrington's black bag."

While these plans were going through Albert's head, the good doctor was making another house call at the Albert Harwick residence. He was seated on the sofa

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beside Mrs. Harwick. His arm was about her shoulders, and her head was nestled snugly against his chest. Whatever heart trouble she might be experiencing at the moment was certainly more amorous than organic.

"You're certain then," she said, "that he picked up the package." I heard him call out that I had dropped something. Then, after I had gone around the block on the bicycle, I saw him carrying the package under his arm."

"And he didn't recognize you?"

"Of course not—not with the old clothing and the cap I was wearing."

She raised her head slightly from his shoulder to look up into his square, masculine face. "And you're sure your plan will work? Sure he'll take the bait?"

"As certain as I am about anything." He removed his arm from her shoulders and held up his index finger. "Item One: he has the poison and knows it is impossible for it to be traced to him. Item Two: he has the information I gave him two weeks ago concerning the building of a tolerance by repeated and increased dosages. Item Three: he hates you fully as much as you hate him, would undoubtedly like to get rid of you even as you would like to free yourself of him, and now he has the means of doing it. Item Four: the first three bottles contain a very weak solution—just enough to make him feel stimulated—and the fourth one is full strength. One drop from that fourth bottle and . . ." He spread his hands.

"But what if he begins with Bottle Four instead of Bottle One?"

"He won't," Berrington promised. "He is extremely methodical and precise in everything he does, and he counts everything he sees. It would be psychologically impossible for him to start with any other bottle than Number One!"

He put his arm around her again, and she snuggled her head against him. "You think of everything!" she said.

The ghost of a smile played for an instant across his wide lips. "Yes," he said. "And—and you're quite sure about the insurance?"

"Oh, yes. When we were first married—that's when he was just beginning as an insurance salesman and before he had an office of his own—he took out a twenty-five-thousand-dollar policy for each of us. He hoped that fifty thousand dollars worth of new business would make him look good in the eyes of the company."

"And the house should be worth at least twenty thousand," he mused. "You could sell it immediately after he poisons himself, and then we could go to Mexico or Las Vegas, get married right away, and I could establish a practice in a new town."

"Just six more weeks," she breathed.

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"Yes. I'm certain he'll make the fatal mistake at your anniversary dinner. Watch out for the dessert, my dear."

Suddenly he took his arm from her and turned her to face him. "You *do* have a mild heart condition, you know. Do you think you'll be able to go through with it that night, with the excitement and all?"

A glint of hardness appeared in her dark eyes. "I'll go through with it, and I'll enjoy every minute of it!" she said evenly.

At the door she clung to him for another moment. "How will we know if he has taken the bait, if he has started to plan the way we hope he will?"

"Easy," he said, disengaging himself from her arms. "If he begins to act differently in the evenings—as if something is stimulating him—you'll know!"

He left, flaunting his little black bag so that any curious neighbor would consider his call as having been purely professional.

At precisely 5:41 P.M., Albert turned into his own walk, counted the six cement steps as he mounted them, noted with satisfaction that there were eight shrubs on the front lawn, decided there were too many fleecy clouds in the sky to count, and entered the front door of the little white house with the green trim.

His wife met him just inside the door and kissed him on the forehead. He could have kissed her on the lips had he stood on tiptoes, or she could have accomplished the same feat by stooping a little—but neither deemed the result as being worthy of the effort.

He went directly to the bathroom to wash the lipstick from his head and wished to the high heavens she would quit the stupid habit. "Anyway," he whispered to himself in the mirror, "she won't be doing it much longer."

They sat down to dinner in the dinette off the kitchen at precisely six as usual, and Mrs. Harwick could scarcely wait to learn if Albert had taken the bait.

"Did you have a good day at the office?" she asked.

He looked up at her. She hadn't asked him anything about the office for years. "So-so," he said, shrugging. "Same as always."

"Did—did anything unusual happen?"

He busied himself buttering a piece of bread. "No, no. Nothing unusual. Nothing at all."

She smiled a little crooked smile. The plan was working. He was trying to keep the finding of the poison a secret from her, and that meant that he probably intended to use it.

She left the table early and went into the living room where she opened a magazine on the sofa. A moment later she heard him go out the back door. She returned to the

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dinette immediately and looked at the little sugar bowl. Yes, there was definitely some sugar gone. Through the window she saw him in the back yard, happily counting the blooms on a rosebush.

She was getting ready to put the dishes into the washer when he hurried through the kitchen and did a little skippety-hop as he entered the living room. A few minutes later the tight little smile at the corners of her mouth hardened as she heard the lilting strains of a Strauss waltz coming from the record player. Generally he played Brahms or Bach; now he was playing the gay waltzes he hadn't played for years.

As the days wore into weeks, Albert's evening gaiety increased. He bought new albums for the record player—albums of modern dance forms and light-hearted lyrics. He seemed scarcely able to sit still and he took long walks before going to bed.

And all the while, behind her magazine, Mrs. Harwick's smile grew.

One evening near the end of the fifth week, after an hour of monochordal rock-'n'-roll, Albert suddenly turned off the record player. "Why, Tuesday is our wedding anniversary!" he said, as if the thought had just struck him. "Shall we have our celebration dinner at Sargi's as usual?"

She lowered her magazine. "I think it would be a wonderful idea!" she said.

It was the first time she had agreed with him about anything since he had made the same suggestion a year ago.

But after Albert had left for work on Tuesday morning, Mrs. Harwick found herself having a bad case of the jitters. Her hands were trembling, and her heart fluttered a few uncomfortable times. In desperation she called Dr. Berrington, and he arrived quickly, black bag in hand.

"I—I don't think I can go through with it!" she said, slumping onto the sofa.

A deep frown creased his forehead. "You mean you want to—to back out?"

"Oh, no!" She shook her head. "It's not that! It's just that I have suddenly developed a case of nerves. I'm afraid that when the time comes tonight—the excitement and everything—my heart might . . ."

He sat down beside her, put his arm around her, and his frown vanished. "There, there," he said soothingly. "You'll be all right—when the moment arrives. Think of it this way: after tonight it will all be over. Tonight will be the end of your unhappy marriage!"

"But I don't want anything to go wrong—I want to be *sure* . . ."

He took his arm from her and reached for his bag. "We'll make certain that things go all right," he said. He took a label from the bag, wrote on it, pasted it onto a small

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bottle, and poured some liquid into the bottle from a larger one. "This is a weak solution, of course—the same as you have been taking. If you should feel an attack coming on, put a drop or two on a spoonful of sugar. That will see you through in fine shape."

He got up from the sofa. "Now, get all the rest you can today, and I'll see you tomorrow, of course."

The anniversary dinner was exactly like all the preceding anniversary dinners they had had for the past ten years—for all the dinners had been patterned after the original wedding dinner of porterhouse steak, baked potatoes, green peas, and tossed salad, with a little surprise gift accompanying the traditional dessert of lemon sherbet. In the beginning Albert had enjoyed the dinners; but they had grown more and more tasteless through the years, and now he pushed his steak and vegetables aside scarcely more than half eaten.

"I will order the sherbet," he said, "whenever you are ready."

She too pushed her food aside. "You may order it any time," she said, getting up from the table. "I'm going to the powder room to freshen up a bit. I'll be back in a minute or two."

When she returned, she noted with satisfaction that the sherbet had already arrived. She had given him ample time to carry out his plan.

Albert took a spoonful of the sherbet and let it dissolve slowly in his mouth. "Delicious!" he announced. "The sherbet is truly delicious tonight. I'm sure you'll like it!"

She toyed at the sherbet with her spoon, scraped away some of the outside layer, and took a bit from near the center. "Yes," she said. "It *is* good!" She felt as steady as a rock now. Albert's own sherbet was rapidly disappearing, and she had no intention of eating her own.

"You've hardly eaten a thing," he said. "At least, my dear, finish your dessert."

She scooped out another tiny portion from the center of the dip.

Presently Albert set his empty dish aside and pushed himself back comfortably from the table. "And, now," he said, "I have a little surprise for you. I'll tell you about it while you are finishing your sherbet."

Suddenly Mrs. Harwick realized that the crucial moment had not already come but gone. She felt strangely elated. He couldn't force her into eating her sherbet now. He had finished his own and was as good as dead. A doctor couldn't possibly arrive in time to save him, and he certainly couldn't reach a hospital in time for help. She laid her spoon aside.

"It may surprise you to learn," Albert said clearly, "that your Doctor Berrington is nothing but a fake! I conducted a quiet investiga-

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tion of him and learned that he is not a doctor at all. In fact, he was expelled from medical school during his second year for engaging in some—uh—unethical practices. But that didn't stop him, of course. He had learned just enough about medicine to get by, and so he set himself up in practice. When he was found out in one town, he just moved to another and started over. He has been convicted on several occasions for practicing without a license, has spent a year in jail—"

"You're lying!" she snapped. "Dr. Berrington is a good doctor! He is the only one who has relieved my heart condition!"

Then suddenly she felt something welling up within her, threatening to explode outward. She began tingling with nervous excitement. The convulsion would strike him within a minute or two, now, and she wanted him to know of her hate for him, wanted to gloat over him.

"Fool!" she said, her lips twisting. "And now I have a surprise for you! You have just poisoned yourself! In a moment or two you'll be dead, and there is nothing you can do about it! Those first three bottles contained a weak solution, not enough to build up a tolerance—"

She paused. The smile that had been growing on Albert's polished-apple face had unnerved her, filled her with vague apprehensions.

"I must admit," he said, "that I did entertain certain dreams of getting rid of you. But then I remembered something I had read quite a while ago concerning strychnine. The human body simply cannot build a tolerance to it no matter how often a light dosage is taken. A grain will still kill within a space of minutes. That is what first caused me to suspect that your doctor knew very little concerning drugs. And when my investigation also revealed that he had been seeing you quite often during my absence, and after Dr. Gregg, the company's examining physician, analyzed the contents of the four bottles, I felt certain that you and the doctor were planning to make me dispose of myself."

He smiled broadly. "And so you see, my dear, I didn't put any poison in the sherbet at all!"

The blood had drained from her face, and her hands had begun to tremble again. She had admitted her intention of trapping him into killing himself, and now he wasn't going to die at all . . . Well, she'd put an end to it in the morning; she'd file suit for a divorce.

"And your doctor obviously had a little plan of his own," Albert continued softly. "After you collected my insurance, sold the house, and married him, he would kill you within a few months and then collect *your* insurance in addition!"

She felt a tightness about her heart. "You're trying to frighten me!" she gasped, fumbling in her purse for the precious vial.

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"I discovered that his last wife died under rather mysterious circumstances just before he came to practice here." Albert beamed.

She poured two drops from the vial onto a spoonful of sugar and gulped it down with a glass of water. "You tried to frighten me into a heart attack!" she accused him. "But your little plan failed! I came prepared!"

"I see you did," said Albert mildly. He drummed on the table with his fingers and counted up to twenty-five. "It might interest you to know that strychnine is not really a heart medicine. It is merely a strong stimulant that, taken often enough by a heart patient, will destroy that organ's function entirely. That is undoubtedly how he planned to get rid of you—destroy you slowly, make it look like death from natural causes."

The action of the drug brought the blood back to her face, stopped the trembling, and gave her a feeling of well-being. She gazed at him with hate-filled eyes.

"It might further interest you to know," Albert went on deliberately, "that the so-called Dr. Berrington was taken into custody by the police this afternoon. Of course, they couldn't charge him with anything more than practicing without a license. He has been extremely clever in covering up his greater evils.

Albert drummed on the table and counted silently, *One thousand, two thousand, three thousand . . .* When he reached *twenty-five thousand,* he punctuated the series with the single word, *dollars,* and leaned forward. "It wouldn't be quite right for him to get off so easy, though—after killing several people, intentionally and otherwise—would it?"

She simply glared at him.

Albert's smile became wistful. "He'll certainly be surprised in the morning when he finds himself charged with manslaughter . . ."

"Manslaughter!"

Albert nodded. "You see, while you were getting ready for our anniversary dinner tonight, I took the liberty of examining the contents of your purse. I found the little vial with the label on it, and on the label—in the doctor's own handwriting, mind you—were the words: *Take one or two drops when needed.* It was but the work of a minute to spill out the contents and refill the vial from Bottle Number Four—the lethal one. Your death will be traced directly to Dr. Ber . . ."

Albert was in the middle of the doctor's name when the convulsion hit her . . .

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Murder in a French butcher shop... What could be more charming?

THE INQUISITIVE BUTCHER OF NICE

by JAMES HOLDING

UNTIL THE MORNING HE DISCOVered the dead man in his refrigerated display case, nothing very exciting had ever happened to Jacques Beauregard.

Beauregard was a butcher. Not a "purveyor of meats," mind you. Not yet a "provisioner" dealing in quality viands. M. Beauregard was much too unpretentious to allow himself and his vocation to be described in these agreeable modern terms. He was a plain man who believed in calling a butcher a butcher. He had a small, cool, spotless meat market in a side street off the Avenue de la Victoire in Nice. There, he sold cuts of top-grade meat to any who sought them. He was well-liked and well-patronized. He, in turn, liked his customers. And he liked his work.

He lived above his shop, alone, having never, alas, acquired a wife —a fact he laughingly explained by saying that since no woman in her right mind would ever consent to marry a butcher, he had never bothered to ask one to. He did, however, have an apprentice, a lad of seventeen named Martin Roget. Martin was learning the butcher's art by working for Jacques Beauregard at starvation wages, but with board and keep thrown in. And since the "keep" provided him with as much excellent beef, pork, mutton, and fowl as he could possibly desire, he felt himself to be quite a fortunate fellow and had nothing but the greatest respect and affection for his mentor.

This *garçon boucher,* Martin, was a bright, cheerful boy, and shared with M. Beauregard a lively interest in *boule,* the cinema, and detective stories. He, too, lived above the shop, in a small garret room directly across the hall from M. Beauregard's own somewhat more lavishly furnished quarters.

It was actually Martin who discovered the cadaver.

One of his duties as Beauregard's apprentice was to rise at seven o'clock each morning, descend to the butcher shop below, and prepare the store for the day's business. This meant scattering fresh sawdust on the floor, raising the steel shutter that protected the store front at night, unlocking the commodious refrigeration room at the rear of the store where the supplies of meat were hygienically stored, and refilling the white en-

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ameled trays of cold meats in the refrigerated display case.

When these chores were attended to, Martin normally climbed slowly upstairs again, still half asleep, and awakened M. Beauregard by knocking on the butcher's door. M. Beauregard would then rise, prepare himself a leisurely breakfast, consume it, and by opening time at 8:30, be down in his butcher shop, swathed in a fresh white apron, ready to serve whatever customers the day might produce.

On the 28th of July, however, this routine was rudely interrupted.

At 7:10 Martin came clattering up the stairs from the butcher shop three at a time. His knock on M. Beauregard's door had none of its usual apologetic politeness. He thundered on the panel with both hands. At the same time, he called in a loud voice through the door. "M. Beauregard! Awake! Instantly! Come quickly to the shop! There is a dead man in our display case, lying on the cold cuts!"

Thus violently shaken from slumber, Jacques Beauregard lost no time in descending to his shop, still clad in his pajamas which Martin, even though half hysterical, was charmed to see were of a gaudy purple color. "You are dreaming, Martin!" cried Beauregard as he ran down the stairs. "A dead man on the cold cuts! It is impossible. What wine did you drink last night with your onion sandwich at bedtime? You are *fou*, crazy!" He burst into the shop. "Where is this dead man, imbecile?"

"Right there, Monsieur," said Martin, pointing at the long refrigerated display case that divided the shop. "When I went to fill the trays of cold cuts . . ." He ceased talking because his *patron* was no longer listening.

Beauregard was looking aghast at the figure reclining full length in his display case. With a little gasp, half sick, half indignant, he noted that Martin had been accurate in his description. The man was, in truth, dead. His wide-open staring eyes testified to that. His hands were crossed on his chest. And he was, indeed, lying on the unsold cold cuts from yesterday, looking for all the world like a man laid out in a transparent coffin.

M. Beauregard stooped to look through the triple-glazed front of the display case. In his shock and horror he used his strongest oath. "Sacred name of a stuck swan!" he breathed. *"Sacré nom d'un cygne percé!"* Martin made a mental note to remember this manly expletive for his own later use. "Martin! Look who it is! It is M. Maurice!"

"Yes," said Martin, studiously avoiding the dead face with his eyes. He felt a bit squeamish. After all, it was still before breakfast. "It is truly M. Maurice. One customer who always paid cash, alas!"

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"Force yourself to be less mercenary," Beauregard snapped. "We have here a dead man, a customer, on our cold cuts. Whether he paid cash or we extended him credit does not signify at a time like this. Call the police, Martin. At once."

"Certainly, *mon patron*. Immediately." Martin moved toward the wall telephone.

"Wait!" said M. Beauregard before his apprentice had taken two steps. "I must think."

Obligingly, Martin paused and rested a hip on the chopping block. Beauregard held his chin in one muscular hand. His bare feet shuffled contemplatively on the sawdusted floor. "It occurs to me," he said finally, "that M. Maurice may have been murdered. There is blood on that tray under his back."

"But of course," said Martin, snickering feebly. "It is the blood sausage tray."

"No jokes, idiot!" said his employer. "Let us make sure." He went around behind the display case.

"The police will be angry if we touch anything," suggested Martin. "They will no doubt look for fingerprints, clues, signs of a struggle. Thus it is always done in Ellery Queen's Mystère Magazine which I read each month."

Beauregard squinted at the unsmudged shiny surface of the sliding panels that formed the back of the display case. "There are no fingerprints," he said assuredly. He looked around his neat, undisturbed butcher shop. "There are no signs of a struggle. Any fool can clearly see that. And there are no clues except a corpse in our meat case. Help me here, Martin."

Together they slid back the panels and shifted the body of M. Maurice enough to see the slash in his bloodstained clothing and, through that, the lips of a deep and ugly knife wound in the corpse's back.

"Enough!" said M. Beauregard. "I must think again."

"M. Maurice was murdered, was he not? Only so could such a wound . . ."

"Quiet, boy. I think."

"I, also," said Martin valiantly. "I shall help you think, *mon patron*. Two heads . . ."

"*Alors,* think! But for the love of God, keep the mouth closed meanwhile, eh?"

Silence descended on the butcher shop, broken only by the solemn ticking of the round clock with a rusted hand that hung on the wall. The hour was now 7:45. They must open the shop at 8:30.

At length Beauregard hitched up his pajama pants. He said, "I have decided. We will not summon the police, Martin. Not yet."

Martin was amazed. "Not call the police? But surely, if ever the police were required . . ."

"Listen, my young ignoramus. If we call the police, what are we doing?"

"Behaving like good citizens of

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France, *mon patron.*" Martin said this stoutly.

"Perhaps. But we shall also be doing just what the murderer expects us to do, shall we not?"

"Admittedly."

"So we shall not do it. We will confuse this killer."

"Why?"

"Out of confusion emerges truth," Beauregard said sententiously. "I have read that somewhere."

"In M. Queen's Mystère Magazine, without doubt," said Martin respectfully.

"I do not remember. But it is only the least of our reasons for not summoning the *flics*. There are others, more powerful. First, publicity. You are too young to appreciate the effects on our business of such a contretemps as this. To have all of Nice know that a dead corpse, formerly a good customer of ours, has been found lying on our cold cuts in our thrice-accursed display case! It is unthinkable, Martin. What customer of ours could stand the thought? No one would want to buy meat in a butcher shop where such things occur, *hein?*"

"That I can comprehend very clearly, young as I am."

"So. And still a third reason forbids me to call the police."

"What is it?"

M. Beauregard ran his hands over his tousled hair in a gesture of near-despair. "They might think *I* killed M. Maurice," he said in a stricken voice. "Or you, Martin."

Martin blinked and sat up with a jerk on the chopping block. "Why should they think that?" he asked. "We didn't."

"Of course we didn't. But consider. The corpse is found in our shop. In our display case. Among our cold cuts. He is a customer of ours. The cause of death seems to be a knife wound in the back. What better source of a long, sharp knife than M. Jacques Beauregard's butcher shop, where the murdered man is found?"

"Ah," said Martin, awe-struck by this dazzling deduction. "You are right, my dear *patron*. Let us not call the police. It would be suicidal. But if not . . ." his voice cracked a little and trailed off weakly, "what do we do?"

"We prepare to open for business as usual," said Beauregard briskly. "Take his legs."

They worked the cadaver out of the display case. "But we are destroying evidence," protested Martin, pulling and hauling until his face was red.

"Not so, thou great worrier," said Jacques. "I intend to keep M. Maurice well refrigerated still." They carried the body to the door of the refrigeration room at the rear of the shop. They carried it inside, their breath showing white in the cold room. "Back here, Martin."

In the most distant corner of the cold room they leaned M. Maurice

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against the wall behind several sides of beef that hung from sturdy hooks. The cow carcasses partially concealed the cadaver. "There," said Beauregard with a sigh of relief, "no one will suspect he is here. Now, that blood stained tray."

Martin quickly replaced that with another in the display case. Beauregard cast a professional eye around the shop. "Good. Now, Martin, dress yourself. Have your breakfast. I shall do likewise. And if you ever hope to become a master butcher, permit no word of this to escape your lips. Do you promise?"

"But certainly."

"Bien."

As they climbed the stairs to their respective rooms, Beauregard said without immodesty, "I have already reduced this problem to its basic elements, Martin—as one reduces the body of a pig to its basic cuts of pork. And although my conclusions have little to do with an apprentice's training, I shall relate them to you. You are young, and a mystery story reader. Therefore listen, and tell me if I have reasoned well.

"Three questions immediately present themselves in this bizarre affair. One, who killed M. Maurice? Two, why was he killed? And three—our major concern—why was the corpse left in our shop, deliberately placed on top of our cold cuts? Do you agree?"

Flattered that M. Beauregard should consult him in such a delicate matter, Martin nodded eagerly. "You have reason," he said. "If we knew the answers to those three problems, we should know where we stand."

Mr. Beauregard said with satisfaction, "Exactly."

"But how shall we learn these so-important answers?" asked Martin reasonably enough.

"Silence, boy," said the butcher brusquely. "I must think."

They separated on the landing before their doors. At 8:30 on the dot they opened the butcher shop for business. And as the day wore on, their customers detected nothing unusual about the butcher and his apprentice except a tendency on both their parts to become a little absent-minded in their tasks, and a certain thoughtful expression on M. Beauregard's ordinarily candid and open countenance.

Between trimming an *entrecôte* for Madame Sevigny and grinding up half a *kilogramme* of round steak for Madame Cothelle, M. Beauregard suddenly snapped his fingers with the air of remembering something important.

"What is it, *mon patron?"* Martin asked as soon as Madame Cothelle had left. "You have thought of something?"

"I have, Martin. Cast your mind back to yesterday," said Beauregard as though yesterday were a hundred years ago. "Do you remember M. Maurice coming in for

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two loin lamb chops and four lamb kidneys?"

"Of course. I stood right here beside you when you served him."

"Well. As M. Maurice turned to leave the shop with his meat, who came in the door?"

"M. Bonfils, the *avocat,*" said Martin promptly. "The one who owes us a meat bill of nine hundred and fifty francs."

"You are an observant boy," his patron complimented him. "And did you by any chance observe that which followed this encounter of M. Maurice and M. Bonfils?"

"No, Monsieur. I did not."

"Ah. M. Maurice stopped as though surprised when he saw M. Bonfils. Then he laughed in a peculiar way—a rather unpleasant way, I thought—and said to the *avocat,* 'How do you do, M. Bonfils? I didn't know you were affluent enough to patronize a quality butcher shop like this? I am delighted to know it.' And M. Bonfils nodded coldly to him and said nothing. Then M. Maurice, laughing again, said, 'And how is Madame Bonfils today, *mon ami?*' I remember it because I did not know M. Bonfils was married. He always buys the meat as though for himself alone, and never enough, surely, for two grown people. Yet 'Madame Bonfils' is what M. Maurice said."

"And how did M. Bonfils reply to that?"

"In a voice very low, scarcely to be heard, he said, 'She is well, thank you,' and M. Maurice went out of the store and M. Bonfils came on to the counter to ask for further credit, as it turned out. But—and this is the marrow of the bone, Martin—for just one moment M. Bonfils' eyes blazed with such a savage hatred as to be almost incredible in a quiet, well-mannered man of the law like M. Bonfils."

"And . . . ?" said Martin, deeply interested.

"That was the entire incident," said Beauregard somewhat weakly. "It does not seem significant to you?"

"No," said Martin bluntly. "Two customers meet in the shop and exchange civilities. What could be significant about that?"

"M. Bonfils' glare of hatred. I only remembered how savage it was just now as I ground up Madame Cothelle's beef."

When lunchtime came, Martin shut the door of the shop as usual and went to the rear door that opened on a dirty alley behind the block of buildings. Beauregard followed him. "It is through this back door," the butcher said slowly, "that the murderer of M. Maurice must have brought the body to deposit among our *viandes.*" He stooped to look at the primitive lock on the door. "Bah," he added in disgust, "a child with a toothpick could open this lock." He turned to Martin. "I am going out to lunch, Martin. Tend things here

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till I return, understood? I cannot forget that look on M. Bonfils' face."

"He is a lawyer," warned Martin. "Do nothing rash, Monsieur, or he will have us both in the *bastille* for lawbreakers."

"Be easy," M. Beauregard said. "I was not weaned yesterday." He clapped on his hat and left the shop.

It was an hour before he returned. And not until a mid-afternoon lull occurred in the butcher shop could Martin ask eagerly, "You have found a clue, *mon patron?*"

Beauregard gave a short barking laugh. "A clue!" he said, obviously pleased with himself. "I have personally discovered, Martin, in less than a single hour of investigation, the solution to two-thirds of our problem! I have answered the 'who' and the 'why' of M. Maurice's murder."

Martin's eyes rounded. He regarded his mentor with the air of a boy who has ordered brisket of beef and been served with tenderloin at the same price. *"Prodigieux!"* he said, startled. "Who is the who and why is the why?"

"Allow me," Beauregard said, "to state a hypothetical case, my young colleague. That is what the famous detectives do without fail, *n'est-ce pas?"* He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on Martin's. "Suppose you were a struggling young *avocat* in Paris. Married to a woman who was not only quite wealthy, but beautiful also."

"It is a pleasure even to imagine," said Martin with enthusiasm.

"Wait. The wife is wealthy and beautiful, yes. But she is also, alas, a hell-cat. For in spite of her background and money, her appetites are carnal and uncontrolled. Can you imagine having such a wife?"

"It is still a pleasure," Martin said. The butcher cast a quizzical glance at the young man but continued. "It is no pleasure for her husband, whom you are supposing yourself to be. Your wife becomes the talk of Paris, you its laughing-stock. You want a divorce, to cleanse your dishonored name. She will not agree, both because the church forbids it and because, being your wife, she enjoys the protection of your ancient name in her indiscretions. In addition, she has a fantastic fortune, *tu sais*—enough money to buy off or intimidate any witnesses you might bring against her. *Eh, bien."* Beauregard spread his hands and shrugged in a peculiarly Gallic fashion. "You are in despair. Your life is ruined. Your legal practice evaporates. And after some time . . . you disappear."

"Disappear?"

"You vanish, you drop out of existence, as far as anyone can find out. Your wife hires detectives to find you, but without success. You are seen no more in Paris. You have chosen flight rather than further humiliation."

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"Where have I flown to?" asked Martin.

Beauregard flashed him a smile. "To Nice. To our lovely city, big enough to hide in, small enough to take the taste of Paris out of your mouth."

Martin snickered. "And now I am a butcher's apprentice in Nice, working for M. Jacques Beauregard while I try to forget my sexy wife and heal my broken heart."

"Very humorous," said the butcher disapprovingly. "I urge you to remember what we have in the corner of our cold room at this moment, Martin. To continue: you establish yourself in Nice. As an *avocat,* naturally—it is all you know. You have changed your name. You build up a new practice. You are beginning to find a new, supportable life. Then—and this is the heart of the matter, Martin—you suddenly fall in love! Hopelessly and gloriously in love with a simple girl in the flower market, down by the Old Town. She is everything your wife is not—sweet, pure, understanding, generous. You resist temptation as long as possible, naturally. But finally you say to yourself, *'Diable!* I must have her!' And you marry her."

"One moment," said Martin shrewdly. "I already have a wife in Paris."

"To be sure. But you have changed your name. Nobody in Nice knows who you really are. What harm can come of it? You marry the flower girl. You have a baby, a little girl named Zou-Zou—"

"I refuse," Martin protested. "The child would be illegitimate."

"You anticipate me," said Beauregard with dignity. "Pray permit me to finish this hypothetical case, my good imbecile. All goes well with you and your family for a while. Then—pouf!—the whole affair blows up in your face. Someone who has known you in Paris suddenly recognizes you in Nice. And discovers you have another wife here. And a baby. What happens to you then?"

"It depends on the one who recognizes me," said Martin. "If he is a man of sympathetic humanity, nothing happens. If he is, on the other hand, a scoundrel, a *mauvais sujet—"*

"He *is* a scoundrel."

"Then—blackmail!" breathed Martin dramatically, entering into the spirit of the hypothesis. "I am the perfect blackmail victim, am I not? I am a bigamist. I have a child who will be branded, if my secret comes out, an *enfant naturel.* I have a wife whom I adore in Nice and a wife whom I detest in Paris. To return to my true wife is unthinkable. I shall pay whatever the blackmailer asks to guard my secret and protect my second family!" Martin's eyes flashed.

"Bravo!" applauded Beauregard. "Now. You pay blackmail to this scoundrel until you are bled white.

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You cannot even settle your butcher's bill. You cannot feed your wife and child in adequate fashion. Then, to cap it all, you meet this blackmailer in a butcher shop one day and he twits you, publicly, about your poverty that he himself has induced. He makes two-edged inquiries about your wife before witnesses. He fills you with renewed dread of exposure. You are roused to the very peak of hate and desperation. What do you do then?"

Martin hesitated not a single second. "I kill the pig!" he cried.

"Exactly." M. Beauregard honed his largest knife against the whetstone on his chopping block. "I believe that is what happened."

"M. Bonfils is the *avocat?*" asked Martin, somewhat deflated at having to substitute a real person, and a customer at that, for his own imaginary role in the drama.

The butcher nodded solemnly. "Not the smallest doubt of it."

"And M. Maurice is—was—the blackmailer?"

"It must be so."

"How have you learned so many thinks, *mon patron,*" asked Martin in humble hero worship, "in the course of a single lunchtime?"

M. Beauregard preened himself. "It was simple," he replied. "I called at M. Bonfils' home. He was not there, naturally, since the telephone book clearly demonstrates that he has an office on the Gambetta. I ask the concierge for *Madame* Bonfils, to discuss with her my unpaid bill. She, I am informed by the concierge—who is our good customer, Madame Constance, by the way—has taken little Zou-Zou and gone to visit her mother for the day, who resides near the Casino Municipal. I therefore chat with Madame Constance about these admirable but debt-ridden people, the family Bonfils. Skillfully I extract from her all the gossip she knows—their love affair, their marriage, the birth of Zou-Zou, their evident poverty, although M. Bonfils does a good business, she believes. She, too, it appears, must wait for her rent money."

"Madame Constance would rather gossip than eat," Martin remarked.

"Yes. She would still be talking if I had permitted. But I say I shall wait for a few moments, on the chance that Monsieur or Madame Bonfils may return. Madame Constance, because she is aware of my honesty, permits me to wait in the Bonfils' room abovestairs. I wait. Neither Monsieur nor Madame returns. Not even Zou-Zou. I grow restless. I prowl the room. I inspect the potted plants on the window sill. I look at the books on a shelf. And on the flyleaf of one of these books I find a name that is *not* Bonfils, as it should be. 'This book,' says the flyleaf, 'belongs to Pierre St. Clair.' It is written in round, back-slanting, stylish handwriting. And below it is written 'Paris, 1959.'"

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"It could have been another's book," protested Martin. "Surely M. Bonfils could have borrowed it from a friend named St. Clair?"

"Not so," said Beauregard with a superior smile. "The name 'Bonfils' written in the mailbox slot on the Bonfils' front door is written in identically the same back-slanting stylish handwriting. You see the significance of that?"

"Yes, of course."

"Very well. I have a name, a city, a date. I ask Madame Constance not to mention my abortive visit. I go to the public library. There, in the gossip columns of *Le Soir,* among the files of Paris newspapers, I find all I need to know about the Paris *avocat,* Pierre St. Clair, who disappeared when his wife disgraced him."

Martin, impressed, said, "You are truly a genius." He nodded. "You could instruct Auguste Dupin!"

"I deny it. If I could, I could also solve the third question we asked ourselves this morning: why was M. Maurice's body left in our display case? This is the crux of the affair, my boy. Why *here?"*

Martin shrugged eloquently. "Who knows? Perhaps he wants us to be suspected of the murder, as you suggested this morning."

"I think not, now that I know who he is. I have extended him generous credit. I have always been polite. I have sold him quality meat. He has no reason to wish me in trouble. Or you, either."

"Perhaps," said Martin, "we should examine the clothing and effects of M. Maurice in our cold room?"

"A capital idea," said Beauregard warmly. "It never occurred to me."

They could not, however, carry out this ghoulish search until the shop was closed for the day. Then, with the front and rear doors locked against interruption, they repaired somewhat hesitantly to the cold room.

"Hold him," said the butcher to his apprentice, "while I search him."

Martin propped up the icy body of M. Maurice. His employer went through the corpse's pockets. "Nothing," he announced at length. "Nothing—not even a sou. No document, no tailor's label."

"You missed the watch pocket in the trousers," said Martin. Holding the dead body erect gave him a decidedly queer feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Beauregard's fingers dipped into the small watch pocket of the corpse. They withdrew slowly a piece of paper, folded very small. "Lean him back in the corner," directed the butcher. "We will read this outside."

Under the drop light over the display case they pored over the unfolded paper. Martin exhaled sharply.

The paper showed a picture of a bald-headed man, with circles of

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dissipation ringing his eyes. Under the picture, in bold type, was the caption: *WANTED—DEAD OR ALIVE! 5000 FRANCS REWARD!* Under this caption a small block of type read: "Grigoire (The Pullet) Bussier. Authorities will pay the above reward for information about this man, dead or alive. He is wanted for murder, robbery, embezzlement, and other crimes. Height: about 1¾ meters. Age: approximately 37. Eyes: blue. Bald. Clean-shaven. If you know anything of this man, call the Police at once."

Beauregard and Martin raised their heads and stared at each other.

"Bald!" said Beauregard. "But M. Maurice had thick black hair."

Martin said, "Blue eyes. But M. Maurice's were brown."

"Clean-shaven," said Beauregard. "M. Maurice wore a black mustache." He looked once more at the picture on the handbill. "Yet M. Maurice is perhaps one and three-quarters meters tall and could have been thirty-seven."

"And the eyes with the big circles. They *could* be M. Maurice's—if they were only blue."

M. Beauregard selected a short sharp knife from his rack. "Come," he said, "we shall experiment."

Once more in the cold room, before M. Maurice's body, Beauregard gently inserted the point of his knife under the skin at M. Maurice's hairline. He pried tenderly with the knife.

"Mon Dieu!" said Martin, staring. "You would scalp a corpse, Monsieur?"

"Not scalp, idiot. This is a toupee." Beauregard ripped the mat of black hair from M. Maurice's head, disclosing an almost bald cranium. "Now, the eyes." His knife point delicately detached brown contact lenses from dead eyes that still showed blue pigment. "And the mustache." He used the razor-sharp knife to shave the corpse's upper lip. *"Regardez!"* he said, stepping back proudly, like a magician calling attention to a rabbit drawn from his hat. "M. Grigoire —The Pullet—Bussier!"

Martin went right to the heart of the matter. "Five thousand francs reward!" he said. "Dead or alive!" His voice cracked with excitement.

Beauregard pondered aloud. "So M. Maurice, too, was a fake. A hardened criminal in disguise, living an easy life on M. Bonfils' blackmail money. How, Martin, could he have known M. Bonfils, a respectable *avocat,* in Paris? So that he would recognize him in Nice?"

Martin said, "It springs to mind that M. Bonfils, or rather, M. St. Clair, as *avocat* acting for the state, may once have prosecuted this man and sent him to prison, perhaps? If so, Grigoire Bussier would remember and hate him forever?"

"Clearly," Beauregard said kindly, "you have been reading detective fiction when you should have been studying your butcher charts,

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little idiot. Nevertheless, I am prepared to wager that you are right." He took his strong chin in his hand. "Let me see. M. Bonfils must have expected we would call the police the instant we discovered the body this morning. So the reward notice was plainly meant for the police to find. Why?"

"In order that the police might properly identify M. Maurice, just as we did. And therefore, so that you would get the reward, having delivered this criminal to them."

Beauregard laughed aloud with simple delight. "Exactly my own analysis."

The apprentice frowned. "One wonders why M. Bonfils did not himself collect the reward on M. Maurice, since he knew who he was."

"No, no," the butcher said. "Impossible. Possessing a false name, a bigamous marriage, and an illegitimate Zou-Zou, would *you* care to become involved with the police on *any* matter?"

"Well, then," said Martin, returning with commendable directness to the immediate problem, "how can we get this reward to which we are now unquestionably entitled, and still prevent the police from thinking *we* killed M. Maurice?"

"Allow me to think once more," replied Beauregard.

Martin flapped his thin arms to warm himself in the chilly air of the refrigeration room while M. Beauregard thought furiously. "Ah!" the butcher said at last. 'Help me carry him out." They carted the body, now bald, blue-eyed, and clean-shaven, from the cold room. "We shall allow him to defrost," said Beauregard. "Until three o'clock in the morning. Then I shall call the police. Place him by the back door."

So when two officers of the law arrived in answer to Beauregard's telephone call at three in the morning, they found a butcher in purple pajamas and a butcher's boy in his undershirt and drawers, standing above a recumbent body outside the rear door of the butcher shop.

"Messieurs," explained the butcher, stammering with excitement, "my bedroom window is directly above this door. I was awakened just now by sounds of a scuffle at this door, and by angry voices. I woke my apprentice here and we descended to investigate, suspecting burglars. And this is what we found."

He pointed dramatically to the dead body of M. Maurice, warm and limber now, with some fresh steer's blood artistically splashed on his clothing and about the flesh of the knife wound in his back. "Do you suppose they could have quarreled, as they jointly attempted to break into my shop—this man and a companion, perhaps? And the companion, in a fit of temper, killed him on this spot? The fellow died just before you arrived."

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The ranking policeman took a close look at M. Maurice in the light of the flash his comrade held. *"Attendez!"* he cried then, in amazement. "This man, my friends, is *Le Poulet!* For seven years we seek him. I am glad to see him dead, M. Beauregard. No matter how he came by his end, it was too good for him. His killer has done society a favor. You have no idea what a blackguard he was, this one. *Le Poulet!* There is a reward for him!"

"A reward?" asked Beauregard innocently. Martin coughed into his shirt tail.

"Most certainly a reward!" The policeman paused, as though struck by a sudden thought. "And I shall see that you get it, M. Beauregard. For turning over this filth to us." He kicked the body of M. Maurice idly. Then he said, "The reward is three thousand francs, if I am not mistaken. Is that not correct, Raoul? You have seen the handbill at the station."

"That is right, *mon chef,*" said the second policeman, smiling. "Three thousand francs exactly."

When the police had departed, moving the peripatetic body of M. Maurice for the last time, it is to be hoped, Beauregard sighed. "They will give us three thousand francs of the reward," he said to Martin. "The remaining two thousand will indubitably go to their favorite charity—themselves."

Martin said nothing, sobered by this first aching knowledge of man's corruption.

Three days later M. Bonfils walked into the butcher shop. He was cheerful. He greeted M. Beauregard almost gaily. "I read in the newspapers of your recent brush with crime," he said. "You are a famous man, now, *hein?*"

"Too famous for my taste," Beauregard said pleasantly. He regarded the *avocat* with narrowed gaze: Surely this small inoffensive man with two wives and a baby could not have crept on that hardened criminal in some dark alley, stabbed him in the back, stolen a car perhaps to cart the body to M. Beauregard's shop, and then laid the corpse on the cold cuts?

The butcher was all at once assailed by doubt. He said tentatively, "We received a reward, Monsieur. A handsome one. And in view of this unexpected windfall, I am serving meat on the house, as it were. A kilo free for every customer. Whatever you choose. For today only, of course, and only to my good customers. What is your pleasure? I can recommend the cold cuts very highly."

M. Bonfils fluttered his eyes toward the display case. And surely, as the *avocat's* glance rested where M. Maurice's body had so recently lain, the small man seemed to change color slightly, and the suggestion of a shiver seemed to shake his narrow shoulders? Yes. M.

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Beauregard was certain of it. It was enough.

"No cold cuts, thank you," said Bonfils, perhaps a shade too quickly. "Perhaps a kilo of veal chops? But as it happens, I have come in to pay you a small token on my account. A delinquent client has at last settled with me today."

"Ah," said M. Beauregard, nodding and cutting veal chops. "About your bill. I am glad you reminded me. We have discovered a regrettable error in your account. You owe us absolutely nothing, Monsieur. Nothing." He turned to Martin, who was listening avidly to every word. "Martin! Kindly look up Monsieur's account in the book. Does he owe us anything?"

Martin rose to the occasion nobly. He found the account book and riffled through it. "No, *mon patron,*" he said in a carefully bored voice. "He owes us nothing—not a sou."

The little *avocat's* smile was like the sun coming out. He accepted the kilo of veal chops, thanked the butcher profusely, and left the shop with a spring in his walk.

Beauregard turned to his apprentice. "Just consider, Martin, what brilliance, what sentiment, what a delicate feeling for true economy of action M. Bonfils has displayed in this affair! To rid oneself of a blackmailer and pay one's meat bill, both at a single stroke! It is no less than magnificent!"

'Q'

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

a new story by

AUTHOR: **ROBERT EDMOND ALTER**

TITLE: ***Come Home, Come Home***

TYPE: Crime Story

LOCALE: Southern United States

TIME: At the end of the Civil War

COMMENTS: *Ben Riker was only a boy when he'd gone off to the War Between the States, and four years later he came back a man—a man who had vowed at Appomattox that he'd never kill anybody again . . .*

A TURTLE DOVE'S LIQUID SOUND came to him as wistful as a sweet memory, but far off, and right then his reception was attuned to nature's green side. He only caught the tail-end and drippings of it.

Beyond the stile the woods picked up, all bright and vivid with spring, and the dogwoods were out and the little nuts were on the walnut trees. It was perfect spring—cool in the shadow pools, glassy warm in the clearings, the round hills standing solid and separate from the woods.

Ben Riker went over the stile and dropped into the shade. It had been four years since he'd passed this way but he remembered the trail well. The floor of the woods was pumpkined with oak roots, and his path meandered like a snake. It shelved down to a spread of loose gravel, and there was the creek gurgling over the stones.

It was a fast cold stream, knee-high if a man was careful—an embarrassing bit higher if he wasn't. Ben paused and looked, letting memory touch him like a caressing hand. The turtle dove's throbbing call came again, and this time he was consciously aware of it.

Turtle dove, he said. Then he looked up. It meant the hearer was supposed to take a trip. But he knew it was a lie because the call came

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from the north and he'd already been there—clear up to a little place called Gettysburg, the highwater mark of his travels. After that the road had led south to a courthouse they called Appomattox.

No, he thought, *I ain't taking any more trips.* He ignored the false prophet and found a line of flat stones that stepped across the creek.

His tree house was in an old lichened oak. He had built it himself when he was thirteen and called it his "Stayaway Place." He'd been right proud of it as a boy; now—viewing it with eyes six years older—he decided it wasn't such-a-much. Not really a house at all, just a shebang, a wickiup made of brushwood.

Standing among great patina-colored boulders, staring across the hollow at the old oak and the shebang, he wondered why he had returned to this place, what he had thought—wished—it might do for him. He had tramped too many dusty roads, too many fields and meadows, climbed too many stone walls and earth entrenchments, seen too many men die, to be able to retreat now into the vague vistas of childhood.

So he decided he had been wasting his time, that he had been acting like a moony young girl with play-party tunes in her head. He had seen the Stayaway Place and discovered that it was no longer a part of him. So he would go back to the here-and-now, go back and pick up his life again—not where he had left it, but where the war's end had fixed it. No longer a boy but a nineteen-year-old man with a mother to care for, and a hillside farm, and a good-sized piece of inherited bottomland.

He was turning away when suddenly a soft clear voice began to sing, and the hollow instantly spun backwards through cosmic time and became an enchanted glen, where a thirteen-year-old boy could escape the monotony of plowing, milking, watertoting, woodchopping, the perverse temper of an older brother, the rigidness of a hillborn father, the distractedly scolding voice of an overworked mother.

"My own dear love come home,
come home,
My friends are rich and
many;
Or else, abroad with you I'll
roam,
A soldier stout as any."

Ben stood at listening attention, his ears strained like reaching fingers, his mind hinging to every mellow note, asking *Who's that?*

Then he shook himself out of it. The singing was coming from the tree house, from his Stayaway Place. And it was a girl's voice. He grunted and started across the hollow. He'd have to see about this.

The girl saw him just a moment after he saw her. She was sitting in the doorway of the tree house

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working her hair with a wooden comb. She was drawing it down and off the right shoulder, her head tilted in that direction, her face up and absently watching the forest roof.

He noticed three things about her right off—that she was as leggy as a doe, that her hair would put cornsilk to shame, and that she was a year or two younger than he. And then she switched hands on the comb, and that's when she saw him standing below her.

Ben smiled and brought his hand up in the casual salute that Confederates affected, and said, "Hello, miss."

She studied him for a moment, then lowered her eyes, chin, comb, and hand all at once. "Hello," she murmured. And he marked her down as honestly shy and he was just as glad, because he'd seen his fill of the brash ones—the painted camp followers.

"What do you think of my old shebang?" he asked.

Her eyes peeped and lingered on him for a second before they drifted to her comb again. "Yours?" she wondered.

"That's so," he acknowledged. "I built it when I was a boy. I reckon it don't seem like much now."

It pleased him when she went to the defense of his tree house.

"Why, I think it's the grandest place ever. It's so far away and high and sort-of lonely-nice and . . ." She had embarrassed herself with her sudden effusion, and her voice went to a point and stopped; but because that too was awkward, she added softly, "I often come here—maybe two-three times a week—whenever I can."

Ben looked around at the towering shortleaf pines, at the tortuous oaks, the clumps of sumac, and the hollow vivid with sawblade grass.

"Yes," he agreed. "It's a place apart. I always felt that."

He looked up again, bringing along his smile. "You mind if I come up and sit with you a spell, miss?"

Well, she was a hill girl and young, and most of the boys her age had been off to war, and so it wasn't that she was actually afraid of him, but just that she didn't have a close grasp of the proprieties.

Ben could understand that and he helped her over the rough spot.

"I guess it wouldn't do any harm—me sitting off in one corner and you by the door, and it daylight and all."

She nodded slowly. "Well, it's your place after all," she said.

"I'll tell you," he said, after he'd swung up to the platform, "I'd be pleased if you'd take this old shebang off my hands. I don't have a use for it any more, and you've been using it right along. No sense in it just going to waste 'way out here."

She watched him make his way into a far shadow-corner and sit, just as he said he would, and then

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she murmured, "Oh, no—thank you kindly. But I couldn't do that."

He didn't urge. He'd made it plain that she could go on using the tree any time she felt like it, and that was enough for the moment.

They looked at each other and then she looked at the comb in her hands again. "You're Ben Riker," she said quietly.

"Yes, I am. I only got home a week ago."

He studied her, trying to vision her as a thirteen-year-old four years ago. "I'm sorry, miss, I'm afraid I can't place you. Are you new hereabouts?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

She didn't seem to want to take it any further, so he left it alone. He told her when he had built the tree house, and how and why, and then he said, "But I'm going to be a busy man from now on. That hillside piece my Ma and I have ain't worth much—all rocks and sassafras. I'm going to come off the hill and work that bottomland I inherited."

She seemed interested, so he went on.

"It belonged to my Uncle Elvy. He got bushwhacked in the feud, so the land went to Pa." He paused, staring at the doorway but seeing the dark visage of his father glowering at the world. "But when Pa got killed at Antietam it became mine."

She nodded and then let nearly a minute go by before she said, "I best be getting home. I got to help my Ma get the dinner on."

"I wonder, miss," Ben said, "if you'd tell me your name first?"

She didn't say anything, just kept her head down.

Ben started to frown but pushed it away with a smile. It wasn't because he'd lived four years with men that he thought she was so pretty. No—a man would have to be stumbling blind not to admit it.

"I was thinking if maybe you didn't object, I'd come to pay you a call at your place."

Still she didn't speak, didn't look up.

"Miss?" he prompted.

Then she looked up and he saw that there was a reason her eyes were so beautiful. They were haunted with a wisp of sadness.

"I'm awful sorry," she said. "I'm Cassie—Cassie Dugan."

He stared at her, and after he'd harassed his thoughts back into alignment, he nodded. "All right," he said. "It's all right, Miss Cassie. I'm done with fighting. I didn't bring any feud home with me."

But Cassie was shaking her head. "Please," she asked, "you have to understand my Pa. He—I heard him tell my brother CJ that he didn't want to start the trouble up again, but that you were the only Riker left on the creek, and he—that he had to stand by his kinfolk."

Ben stood up. "I understand

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that, Miss Cassie. But you tell your Pa I got to stand by my convictions too. I vowed at Appomattox I'd never kill anybody again, and I aim to keep that vow. Your Pa and CJ can do what they think they have to. But I ain't feuding."

He came to the doorway and looked down at her. She was staring up at him with mute appeal in her eyes, but he pretended nothing was amiss.

"Miss Cassie, can I offer you a hand down?"

Exactly when and why it had started no one living on Spoon Creek knew. Legend put it back around the turn of the century, and anyone who asked *why* might receive as many as ten different versions—anything from a disputed boundary line to a stolen pig.

And *who* had triggered the feud was another question that went asking. Only a few things were certain: it had started between the Prathers and the Rikers—the Dugans had been hauled in because they were related by marriage to the Prathers; and it had started far down on the Big Silty—the Dugans and the Rikers on Spoon Creek had been drawn into it indirectly and yet, as those things go, inexorably.

It had never reached gigantic proportions on Spoon Creek, mainly because of the distance between the families concerned. The Dugans lived down at the mouth of the creek at the foot of Lark Hill, while the Rikers had always been "far-in folk," clinging to their hillside shanties near the source of the Spoon.

And another thing in Spoon Creek's favor—women and children had always been counted out. Ben had just turned feuding-age when he went off to war. What the feud had tried to accomplish in decades, the war did in four years. Now Ben was the last male Riker on the creek, and Cash and his son CJ were the last of the male Dugans.

Ben finished his sowbelly and left the table to go to the limestone fireplace to fetch his corncob from the fireboard. Down underneath, the black pot on the swivel hook was perking and it was a friendly sound and gave out a warm rich odor. His mother was still at the table drinking her coffee.

Ben got his cob going and returned. His mother didn't look up.

She might have been a handsome woman if it hadn't been for the life the hills had led her. She wasn't but thirty-seven or eight, Ben figured. Her disposition was stony, but not from religion or poor health—just from the tricks life had played on her. It was her defense. It seemed to say, *Let it come whatever it is, I've taken worse.* The war had cost her a husband and a first son, and the feud had cost her some too. But she wouldn't talk about it.

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He looked at her from the corner of his eye. She'd been up until midnight boiling scrapple, and it told on her face. And tonight, he supposed, she'd be on hands and knees scouring the pine floor with sand, making it as white and soft as silk. And where was the sense in that, when he was going to build them a new cabin in the bottomlands?

He finished his pipeful and left the table again, and his mother spoke for the first time. "Going out again tonight?"

Ben paused by the door. "Yeah. Reckon I'm still foot-itchy."

"But you ain't taking a gun." It wasn't a question.

"I told you I'm through with gun-fighting."

She had a sip of coffee. "But the Dugans ain't."

Ben closed his eyes. He knew he had to try to explain it again.

"Ma, each man makes up his own mind how he's going to act. The Dugans think they have to feud. But I've had my fill of seeing men killed and of me killing some of 'em. It ain't that I've got religion over it exactly, but . . ." His environment hadn't made him articulate. He understood stock and seasons and how to soldier, but to express a feeling in words was still beyond him.

"I ain't saying that the war was wrong. I don't know. I just know I was glad when it ended. Win or lose, I was glad. I ain't come home to start another."

She said nothing. She sipped at her coffee and looked at the two vacant chairs at the other end of the table. Ben opened the door.

"I'll be back."

She said yes, but he could see she didn't believe it; he could see in her eyes what she was thinking, *Maybe it won't be this time, or maybe not tomorrow, or even next week, but some day he won't come back—because they'll be laying for him and he won't lift a hand.*

And there was another reason now why he wouldn't fight them, but he couldn't tell her about it, because then she'd know for sure they were going to kill him. He went out the door thinking, *Maybe it don't really matter; she's ribbed herself up to my death anyway; she's got her mind set to it, and now she's trying to set her heart.*

The moon drifted low and gold-dollar proud, and a bat went wing-clicking through it, leading Ben's way. He went on down to Tipple, which wasn't a town at all, only a handful of shanties above the hollow from the meeting house.

The door of the store was open and leaking a smell of leather, oiled tools, and crackers. And the voices of the nightly porch-idlers were subdued and comfortable and followed a pattern: *Evening there, Volney. How you?* And: *Just fine, thankee. Just fine tonight. You?* And they called the same to Ben and he answered just like that, and went on his way down the hollow,

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down the creek to Lark Hill.

The weathered old Dugan shanty crouched deep in an ancient grove of pawpaws, looking like a disjointed part of the stunted hill that nudged it from the rear. Right away the hounds knew about Ben and they came out howling with the peculiar echoing timbre of theirs that sounds as if they were at the bottom of a well.

Ben saw the door open with a blazing flood of light, and the silhouette that stood there and called off the hounds had Cassie's voice.

He came around the leaning splitrail and entered the yard, touching his cap. "Evening, Miss Cassie. I come to call."

Cassie left the porch in a hurry. "Oh, Ben," she whispered. "I told you you shouldn't. My Pa—"

Someone was coming up the trail from the springhouse. They could hear whistling in the dark. Cassie grabbed Ben's arm and looked around frantically.

"That's CJ," she said. "You've got to go right now, Ben."

But he wouldn't. He smiled at her and said, "I didn't come 'way down here to visit CJ, Miss Cassie. I came to see you."

CJ suddenly appeared in the moonlit clearing and stepped on a leaf.

"Who's that with you, Cass?" he wanted to know. He had the long bony look of his environment, and had more devilment and orneriness in him than a river even had water. Ben remembered him from when.

He stepped away from Cassie. "Hello, CJ. It's me—Ben Riker."

CJ's reaction took three long seconds, then he gave a start.

"Well, I be dogged!" he whispered. Then—"If you've come looking for trouble, you've come to the right place, Ben Riker."

"Maybe I'm not here for touble."

"Maybe a skunk don't stink."

Cassie was at Ben's arm again, trying to draw him off. "Ben . . ."

"What are you doing there with him, Cass? I think maybe you're going to need a tanning."

"Now hold on," Ben started to say. But CJ shoved in between them, grabbing for Cassie's wrists. Ben twisted to meet him, thrusting Cassie aside. It was all CJ needed.

His fist banged Ben's nose and a smear of glistening lights blanked out the farm, hill, everything. Ben went back three steps quickly and shook his head, trying to rattle the lights from his brain. CJ came at him fast, bony fists pumping.

Ben hunkered down and started swinging blind. His left met something just right, going splat!—and it jarred reality back to his brain and eyes. He looked around, saw Cassie standing aside with a hand to her mouth, and CJ down on one knee, gingerly nursing a dripping nose.

"That'll be enough of that!" The voice was pistol-sharp and it came from the porch. Ben looked up and saw Cash Dugan standing there

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with a rifle. Something turned to a point in his stomach and started to spread.

"Mr. Dugan," he began. "I'm Ben—"

"I know you. *You*—CJ. Get up now. Fetch some water to that nose."

CJ got up and started cursing Ben—ugly, hissing words, wet with blood. But the old man wasn't interested in hearing them.

"CJ," he said flatly, "I think you heard me."

Ben watched CJ limp away. Then he looked at Cassie.

"Please, Pa. Ben was just—"

"Miss, you belong in the house with your Ma," Dugan said.

"You ain't going to shoot him, Pa."

"That's right, I ain't. *This* time. Do like I say!"

Ben nodded at her. "It's all right, Miss Cassie." He turned back to Dugan. "There's no call to get up on your ear, Mr. Dugan. I came here on a sociable call. I ain't feuding."

Cash Dugan stood nearly as tall as the porch post, and he would have made it except that he was a man with tired shoulders. His face was mostly beard and it gave his eyes and nose the look of an eagle.

"I've heard some about that," Dugan said. "But it don't chop any wood with me. You and me are natural enemies. I ain't shooting you now because it's not the kind of thing I like to do around my women folk. But if I see you down to this end of the creek again . . ."

Ben spread his hands in the moonlight.

"Then you'll see me just as I am. And you can take your time shooting back or front, because I won't be armed."

Dugan thought a bit, then said, "Look here. I don't like shooting you. I never held nothing against you personal—except your name. But the Rikers have done my kinfolk harm and I can't forget it."

"Remembering things long after they do you any harm is like taking a stick to a dead horse that once kicked you," Ben said. "I've never hurt you or any Dugan, and you haven't hurt me. So where's the fuss?"

But Dugan was a hill man and he had his convictions.

"It won't wash that easy. You're a Riker and I'm a Dugan, and I've got it in me to stand by my kin. That's all I know."

Ben looked around for his cap and went for it. Then he turned to Cassie.

"I'll be seeing you again, Miss Cassie." He looked at the porch. "And I won't be bringing any gun."

"Then you best bring a coffin," Dugan called after him. "Because I won't be building you one!"

The sun began like a great fire burning just beyond the rim of the world. When it began inching over the horizon it was red and angry-

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looking and it sent golden feelers out to prod the gray dawn shadows toward the west. For a tense moment it hovered on the eastern hills as if it were a fiery ball about to take a roll. Then it stepped daintily off the edge and drifted into the sky. Then it was Sunday.

Ben didn't go to the meeting house with his mother.

"I reckon I lost the trick of it when I was in the army," he explained to her. "A soldier prays to himself before a battle. When it's over he's so blame glad to be alive he forgets about praying until the next one. Maybe that's how it's supposed to be, because maybe that's the only thing worthwhile. Anyway, I'll do mine on my own."

His mother was putting on her bonnet, knotting it just so under her chin.

"Think I'll just take a stroll in the woods," he added.

"To that hide-hole you built when you were a boy?" she asked.

He looked up from his splint-bottom chair. "How'd you know about that?" he wondered.

"I know a lot of things."

He grinned at her. "Bet you do at that."

She found her little handbag on the fireboard and checked its contents. "I know Cassie Dugan's been using it for a couple of years."

Ben cleared his throat and looked at the rag rug on the plank floor. His mother said nothing more, but he could tell she knew.

The sun was high as he walked, sailing in a gaudy sky; underneath lay the valley, sloping away from the warm hills that stood rounded against the green hem of the woods. It was good to walk in country like that—nice in the sunny spots with the warmth heavy on your shoulders, nicer in the shadow-pools with the green shade all around you. And it was good not to have an army pack on your back and a Sharps rifle in your hand, and not have to keep one eye peeled for farmboys in blue uniforms, who were just waiting to whack a Minié ball into you.

Maybe if Cash Dugan and CJ had been in the war they would understand how he felt now about killing. Maybe they would realize that the tragedy of civil strife wasn't a question of a right and a wrong tangling, but of two rights clashing together. And the only way to end something like that was to put down your guns, shake hands, and start off fresh.

He didn't expect to find Cassie in the tree house that morning. It wasn't why he had gone there—he'd just wanted to be alone for a while, to think things out. But she was there, sitting back in a corner with her hands folded in her lap, as though she had known he'd be coming.

"Why, Cassie. I thought you'd be at home today."

She shook her head. "Not any more. I ran away this morning."

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He came over and squatted down and took her hand. It was soft and small and absently he noticed that the nails were clean.

"Did your Pa beat you?" he wondered. "Because of me?"

"I didn't give him the chance. I ran off first."

But that didn't make sense. She'd said she ran away that morning, and if Cash was going to whip her he'd have done it the night before. Besides, hill kids were brought up on whippings. It was good for them, and darn few ever left home because of one.

"That ain't why you ran away," he accused her.

She wasn't looking at him again; and right about then he knew the real reason. He raised her chin gently, turning her face up to his. The most beautiful eyes in all the world—but he had to get that sadness out of them.

"It was for me, wasn't it? You were afraid I'd be coming back to see you again, and your Pa or CJ would kill me."

"Oh, Ben—" her voice was a breath. "I knew you'd come back, and—"

He pulled her tightly to him, and a moment later thought, *Why, it's the first time she's ever been kissed.* Then he realized that in a sense it was his first too. And suddenly he felt that there was a pattern to things, an intangible plan. He had chosen this place, built this tree house as a mere boy for a reason that the universe considered inevitable.

"Ben, what are we going to do? Pa and CJ will be coming after me. They'll search the Spoon end-to-end. They'll find this place sometime sure. Ben—oh, Ben, I *can't* let 'em kill you."

He nodded, trying to think, his mind slogging along like an old plow horse with a loose shoe. Yeah, they'd be coming with their rifles—and that would be the end of the male Rikers on Spoon Creek.

He hunkered back on his heels and looked at the girl's eyes.

"All right, Cassie," he said quietly. "You come with me."

It was late twilight before Ben could reach the Dugan place. He cut through a stand of willows and came up to the edge of a waste piece. The creek was washing the stones at his back. There was no sense in getting himself killed right off, so he stayed where he was and hailed the shanty. "Cash! Cash Dugan! I want to talk to you!"

The door swung open and the first thing to come through it was the barrel of Dugan's rifle. Dugan had the look of a wounded bear.

"Well, I don't want any parley with you, Ben Riker," he shouted. "Just want to know do you know where my girl Cassie's at."

"That's what I come to see you about. She's with me. This morn—"

The light was bad and Dugan

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moved fast. The only warning Ben had was the orange spurt of fire at the business end of the rifle. It missed him by a wink and hit the handbank across the creek.

Ben ducked, shouting, "Hey! Give me the chance to tell you—"

Right then CJ cut loose from the shanty window, and the hounds started kicking up a storm, and the balls were going fut-fut-fut! in the sand behind Ben, and he decided, To hell with this, and got out of there fast.

They didn't put the hounds on him because they saw him take off right up along the shallows of the creek, and they figured, What's the sense in using a dog when a dog can't scent nothing in water except that it's wet? But after ten minutes of tailing him along the bank on their own, they wished they hadn't been so hasty. He let them see him leave the creek, even gave them a shot before he dodged into a stand of laurels.

But he wasn't giving much—all flying legs and leaping this way and that through the stunted bays and the night shadows closing in fast. And they wondered, *Never knew that boy to be that careless—don't see how he could have lived through four years of war.*

Ben knew what he was doing—trouble was it had all happened so quickly he hadn't had time to sort out the finer details. But he figured this way: *That CJ, being young and full of punk and vinegar, is going to be in the lead; if I get him out of the way, then I'll stand a chance with the old man.*

The moon had little effect on the floor of the forest. Here and there it found an opening in the leafy terraces and cast down a pale gray moon-pool; but Ben was leading them along an old deer-run and the path meandered through the heart of a sapling thicket, and the darkness was the dark that follows the shattering of a lamp in a closed room.

He ran in a crouch, looking, feeling when necessary, for tools at the edge of the path. One thing he wanted and found was a sturdy fist-sized rock; another was a goodly length of wild grapevine. Then, in a spot where the spindly saplings crowded the path on either side and the catclaw and elderberry bushes were as thick as the brush on a new broom, he selected a man-high sapling, tested it for spring, grunted his satisfaction, and stepped off the path to go to work.

He found a small forked branch with one tine shorter than the other; he cocked the sapling back to the ground, lashed the rock to the tip, then secured the sapling with the fork, attached the grapevine to the fork, brought it back onto and across the path, and tied it to a root. He stepped carefully over the spring-trap and selected a barrel-trunked oak tree to hide behind. He felt like a guitar after a quadrille solo beat and trembly and

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ready to be set aside for a while.

The Dugans were coming down the path in a hurry, CJ leading, his narrow head far out on his scrawny neck. His right foot triggered the grapevine without warning. Instantly the fork jerked out and the sapling sprang at the path with a sss-wit and the rock whacked him right behind the ear. CJ went down—all of him and all at once—and didn't move.

Cash Dugan slammed to a startled halt and gaped at the dark bundle at his feet. "CJ! Lord-a-little jaybirds, boy! What hit you?"

"Nothing serious, Mr. Dugan," Ben said from his cover. "Just a spring-trap with a rock to it."

Dugan swung his rifle waist-high crouching over it, panned it slowly at the dense darkness, looking for the man to go with the voice.

"Ben Riker, if you've killed my boy—"

"CJ's just taking a nap. No piddly little rock is going to bust that hard head of his. I want to talk to you."

Dugan was squinting suspiciously at the vaguely looming oak tree. He covered it with the rifle. "I think I've spotted you, Riker. Now I'm going to come at you." He raised a foot to step over CJ.

"I wouldn't take any rash steps if I was you, Mr. Dugan. The Okefenokee boy I knew in the army taught me how to make some *real* widowmakers. Like that rock trick, only his way was with a knife tied to the tip of the sapling. Then there's the pointed-stake deadfall . . ."

But Dugan had already stalled. He was side-slipping his eyes slowly, peering at the dense thicket. "Well—" he murmured. "Well, all right. Say your piece. I ain't equipped to fight knife-slinging trees and whatnot in the dark."

"I don't have much to say, Mr. Dugan, except what I've already said—I didn't come home to feud. What's the sense to it? If I kill you, CJ'll kill me. Or if I get lucky and kill both of you, then some Prather down at Big Silty will hear about it and come cutting the leaves after me. So if I feud, I'm whipped before I start.

"But I also got another reason—a bigger one. I can't shoot a girl's pa or her brother and marry the girl."

"*Marry* her?" Dugan cried. "*Marry* Cassie?"

"That's right. We got married this afternoon."

Cash Dugan couldn't get his words started, so Ben said, "You don't have to believe my mouth. I got the paper to prove it and Preacher Sims' got my dollar." Suddenly he stepped out from behind the tree and came into the path, his hands hanging open at his sides.

"So, Mr. Dugan, if you're the kind of man that shoots his own kinfolk—well, blaze away. I ain't stopping you."

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Dugan couldn't believe what he was hearing. *"Kin*folk?"

"You blame fool!" Ben cried. "Don't you see what's happened? I'm CJ's brother-in-law. I'm *your* son-in-law!"

Dugan, rooted to the spot, lowered his rifle carefully, as if it weighed half a ton and might slip and mash his foot. He blinked and then looked up through the thicket to see if the moon, or maybe the sky, was still there. "My son-in-law?" he whispered.

Ben rubbed at the back of his neck and smiled. "You can move any time you feel like it, Pa. I was only fibbing about those widow-makers."

Ben walked alone with a wistful smile. Maybe it hadn't been the fanciest wedding the creek had ever known, but there hadn't been any tomfool shivareeing either, like most weddings. And he was just as glad. A wedding was sacred—just as well it was also kind of private.

And one thing that had meant a lot—the look in his mother's face, that warm thaw that he had thought was long gone. She'd given them her own ring. It had been nice of her, but they hadn't really wanted to use it—they'd wanted something of their own. But when they saw how much it meant to her they said, All right, and Thank you, and then everything had been fine. Then his mother had taken Cassie in her arms and kissed her, and they both did a little crying.

He paused by the lichened boulders and looked across the darkened hollow at the Stayaway Place. The towering pines stood as aromatic sentries over the glen, and the quiet moonlight cut through them on the slant and hid itself in deep hollow places, like a silver pool, or a sparkling bed of holly leaves.

The warm, flickering glow of candlelight was showing through the ribbing of the tree house, and he heard a soft, clear voice singing.

"My own dear love come home,
come home,
My friends are rich and many;
Or else, abroad with you I'll roam,
A soldier stout as any."

Ben hurried across the hollow.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**CORNELL WOOLRICH**
TITLE:	***I'll Never Play Detective Again***
TYPE:	Detective Novelet
LOCALE:	United States
TIME:	Timeless
COMMENTS:	*An engagement party at the swank Park-Ashley should be a gay and carefree event. But tragedy struck in a most unusual way. A Woolrich whizbang thriller!*

I SAT THERE WITH MY TOPHAT OVER one eye, listening to him whistle like a canary off-key while he struggled with his white tie. His engagement to Marcia had just broken in all the papers, and her people were throwing a party at the Park-Ashley to celebrate it.

"Give up," I kidded as he fumbled his tie for the fifth time, "you'll never get those two ends to meet."

The telephone started in again. "Another reporter?" he groaned.

But she didn't sound like it when I got over there. "Tommy darling, is it really true? Let me be the first to—"

I doused it against my shirt front and wagged him over. "Somebody wants Tommy darling. Just wait'll I tell Marcia this."

I could joke about it because he wasn't that kind at all. We'd been rooming together ever since the days when we only had one dress suit between the two of us, and whoever happened to wear it, the other guy had to stay home in bed.

I went in to get an extra handkerchief. When I came back he'd already hung up.

"I'd have been just as pleased without her good wishes," he told me, going down in the elevator. "That was that Fortescue gal just then."

She'd developed rather a bad case of it the year before, before he met Marcia. The minute he found out about it, he started to dodge and duck and go into reverse; her nature was too explosive to have around the house. She'd even tried

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to have him beaten up by gangsters, probably so she could nurse him back to health; only he'd fractured the jaw of one and chased the other to the corner of First Avenue and Fifty-fourth Street, where he lost him in the traffic. Tom couldn't prove it was she, of course, but he'd had his suspicions. After that she'd given up the job as hopeless and we hadn't heard any more of her—until tonight.

"Funny thing about it," he went on, while we were waiting at the door for a taxi, "is the big change in her all of a sudden, saying maybe it was all for the best. Wonder how much of it she really meant?"

In the cab he suddenly snapped his fingers. "Forgot all about it! I should have sent Marcia some flowers."

We stopped at a florist and he went in. I waited where I was.

"Where are they?" I asked when he came back empty-handed.

"He's rushing them down there by special messenger. Some of the swellest red roses you ever saw, kind they call American Beauties. She must be tired of orchids by now."

It was a three-ringed circus when we got there. The Park-Ashley was seething with debs, subdebs, postdebs, Princeton and Dartmouth undergrads, dowagers, men-about-town, the whole social zoo. The party was supposed to be on the second floor but it was spilling over in every direction.

Tom and I hired a room together to rest up in later on, before breakfast. We had a highball apiece to see us through the first eighty dances, then we went downstairs and reported for duty. We found Marcia standing next to her mother on the receiving line.

"Almost thought you were going to renege on your own party," she smiled.

"Did you get my flowers?" he asked.

She looked blank for a minute, then began to laugh. "You must have forgotten to put a card in, in your excitement! Whole carloads of them have been coming all evening."

"I bet I find 'em!" a crystalline voice piped up. Marcia's kid sister was standing there, eyes alight with excitement. "I know his taste."

"Red roses," I said behind the back of my hand, to help her along. She turned and ran outside.

Tom began to dance with Marcia, and just as I was girding up my armor to step into the fray, the kid came darting back again. "I see you found them all right," I said. One was pinned to her dress and she was holding a bud in her hand.

"Here, this one's for you." She reached for my lapel and drew the long stem through the buttonhole, then snapped it off short. "Ow!" she complained, and put her thumb to her lips for a second.

"See, that's what you get!" I grinned.

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We started to dance, but before we were halfway around the room she was leaning against me in a funny sort of way, as if she were tired out. I put my hand to her chin, tilted her head back, and looked into her face. Her eyes were just drooping closed. "Tired," she murmured. "Dick, I—can hardly stand up any more—"

Suddenly she crumpled and would have toppled over if my arm hadn't been around her waist. I managed to half-carry and half-lead her over to the door, and no one noticed; it looked like one of those crazy new dance steps. As soon as I got her outside I picked her up from the floor altogether and made for the nearest elevator. She weighed less than nothing, just somebody's kid sister.

"What do you feel?" I breathed, "What hurts you? Old Man Dick'll take care of you."

She opened her eyes just enough to show two slivers of white, like crescent moons. "Old Man Dick 'n' Little Girl Jean," she sighed. Then she sort of passed out altogether. The elevator slide opened and I snapped, "Hurry up, take me up to wherever their suite is! And get hold of a doctor!"

The Planters seemed to have taken a whole floor for the occasion. I stumbled through three rooms with her before I got to anything with a bed in it. Flowers everywhere; they were all going to be distributed to hospitals in the morning. A pert-looking number with a lace handkerchief cocked over one eye was sitting reading *Ballyhoo*.

"C'mon, get your thrills later," I ordered. "Help me with Miss Planter."

She squeaked like a mechanical mouse and got the expensive covers at half mast.

A distinguished-looking man with a silver goatee miraculously found his way in to where we were without a road map, shoving a bridge hand into his breast pocket. He swept aside his dinner-tails and sat down beside her.

"Turn the other way," he said to me and began to undo the shoulder straps of her dress. Something fell across one of my patent-leathers as he tossed it aside, a huge cabbagy red rose; I kicked it out of the way. "This child is dead," he said, in the same tone of voice he would have said "Three spades." The French maid squeaked again, then covered her mouth.

I picked up the pale-green telephone and asked them to page Tommy Nye in the ballroom. I acted as hard as a callus on a mailman's foot but I was crying inside of me; too much Princeton won't let you show what you feel.

There was a long wait and the music from downstairs came over the wire clear as a bell and out into the room, almost like a radio tuned very soft—that waltz of Coward's, *Nevermore*. Her first party and her last, she'd never dance again.

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"Tom," I said when he got on, "better take Marcia and her mother back to their house, give them any excuse at all, only don't let them come up here—"

"What's up?" he said worriedly.

"The kid just died up here. Don't let it get around, you can break it to them when you get them home. Get back as quick as you can, will you?"

He hung up without a word; I couldn't tell how he was taking it—but then how would anyone take a thing like that? I told the maid to take the Planters' wraps down to them, and then go home with them; she was too frilly for a death-chamber.

The society doctor, meanwhile, had got in my hair. He'd telephoned in his notification to the authorities all right, and exerted himself to the extent of tipping one of the pale-green sheets over the poor youngster's mouth. But the next thing I knew he was back at the phone again, had some other suite on the wire, and was bidding in his hand in the game that was waiting his return. I'd seen some cold-blooded things in my time but that topped them all; I suppose he thought I wasn't listening. "—in that case my partner and I will double," he was saying. "You can begin leading, I'll be right down."

"Let me help you get there even quicker!" I blazed, and hurtled him through the three adjacent rooms with one hand at the back of his neck and the other at the opposite end of him. He stumbled when I let go of him, and by the time he had recovered and turned to puff himself up like a pouter pigeon, I had slammed the door in his face.

I paced back and forth for half an hour amid the chrysanthemums, gardenias, and sweet peas while the medical examiner was busy in the inner room with her. A policeman with hay fever was sneezing at the outside door. And down below they were still dancing, I suppose, and drinking all over the place.

Tom showed up very paled around the gills. "God, what a ghastly experience! They both went all to pieces, had my hands full—"

The inner door opened and the examiner came out and went by without a word—or would have but Tom got in front of him and blocked his way. "What's the score?" he asked in a husky voice. Behind him the other two showed up; I hadn't identified them yet, all this was new to me. But they weren't leaving yet, far from it. I could tell by the way they strolled out and took in everything; they were there for the night—and maybe then some.

The examiner tried to side-step Tom, but Tom wouldn't let him and snagged him by the lapel. "I'm engaged to her sister—I have a right to know—the whole thing was too sudden—what's it all about?"

One of the two watching us

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spoke up, in a slow drawl dripping with some sort of hidden meaning. "Funny you should say that, about it was too sudden. You seem to be ahead of us. How come you know it wasn't all jake, when we haven't told you yet?" His eyes never left Tom's face.

"Anyone would say the same thing—she was only seventeen—to drop that suddenly—" Tom broke off. "Who are you, by the way?"

"Homicide," the drawl came back. He snapped off a bud from a sheaf of long-stemmed La Frances and drew it through his buttonhole. We both of us sort of tensed at that. That word, ominous-sounding. He nodded to the examiner. "Go ahead, tell him, if he wants to know so bad. Then maybe after that it'll be our turn and he'll tell us one or two little things."

"Tell, hell," snapped the examiner, "I don't get paid for overtime."

"Poetic, aren't you," I murmured. "You really should be rhyming couplets for tombstones."

"She was killed in a poetic way too," he tossed back just before he closed the door after him, "like this was medieval Italy. Killed by a rose. A rose whose stem was sprayed with something deadly, a rose whose thorns were impregnated with it whatever it was. She pricked herself on it—the ball of her thumb tells the story. We're having an autopsy—"

"That ain't all we're having, either," observed the more truculent of the two detectives. He scanned the cardboard lid of a box he'd brought out with him, then asked for The Fernery, Incorporated, on the wire. "Every floral piece in these three rooms has a card stuck in it—except the bunch that red rose came from. We're having a talk with the florist that delivered 'em—"

I gave Tom a look, but he was staring down at the floor, so I couldn't catch his eye. I hadn't seen him select them, but the kid had claimed she'd found them, and Marcia had said something about his having forgotten to send a card with them; it sounded an awful lot like his. The horticulturist who'd grown them must have made some ghastly slip-up, sent them on to the florist without realizing that death lurked along their stems—

But then why didn't Tom speak up, I wondered, and save them the trouble of checking with the florist? It would only look worse if they got the information that way. What did he have to hide? *He* had had nothing to do with it; an accident like that could have happened to anyone. But then maybe he didn't realize even yet that they were the ones he'd sent.

I cleared my throat. "Sounds a lot like the ones—" And then looked at him, to let him finish it himself.

He wouldn't meet my eyes, kept staring down at his feet.

Meanwhile the detective had got through to The Fernery and it was

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too late to do it the easy way. "Evans, Homicide Squad," he snapped. "You the manager? You deliver two dozen American Beauty roses to Miss Marcia Planter at the Park-Ashley Hotel this evening? That ain't what I asked you, I didn't ask if you delivered 'em personally or sent 'em by messenger! What I wanna know is, did they come from your shop? Well, who ordered 'em . . . Didn't write any card, eh? Well, would you know him if you saw him again?" His eyes flicked over at Tom and back again, as he put the question.

I shrugged violently at Tom, gestured with both hands, meaning in pantomime, "Why don't you tell him? What are you standing there mum like that for?" He just looked at me and smiled a little, with the left half of his mouth.

The dick, Evans, hung up. "Any objections to accompanying us—and the flowers—to the shop for a couple of minutes, Mr. Nye?" But it wasn't exactly a question, it was an order.

Tom saluted with one finger at his brow, turned toward the door without saying a word.

"Me, too," I said.

"Who's the echo?" the second detective wanted to know. "Ain't it about time we were finding out?"

"If you'd taken the trouble to ask, you'd have found out long ago," I said. "The name is R. Walsh, Princeton '52."

He didn't pop any collar buttons over it. "Well, meet B. Doyle, P.S. 62," he said, without offering his hand.

I thought I'd kid him a little. "Howju?" I said gravely, ducking my chin. "I'm this chap's flat-mate and slated to be his best man. Anything else you'd like to know?"

"Liking," he said, "has nothing to do with it. I'd like never even to have seen you, much less heard of you, but this is business. So pop open your trick hat and tail us."

"Tail you?" I said, "What am I, a collie?"

"Oh," he protested coyly, "now don't pin me down *that* closely!" and went out after Tom and Evans.

The four of us got in a taxi and went to where Tom had bought the flowers, which Evans had brought along, box and all, under his arm.

The proprietor was a silly-looking duck wearing a morning coat. "Ah, yes," he said, taking a peep under the lid, "these are from my shop. Is there something wrong?" And he washed his hands without soap or water.

"That," said Evans bluntly, "is none of your business. The main idea is, who bought 'em?"

"Why, this gentleman did, of course." He turned to Tom, and even asked for corroboration. "Didn't you, sir?"

Tom said quietly, "I bought two dozen roses from you and told you to send them where these were sent, yes. But I hardly think these

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are the same ones you brought out of the case to show me—or else there's something wrong with your stock. You see, they say one of them killed my fiancée's young sister." And he looked down at the floor again.

The florist went "Ip!" and jumped back about a foot from the box that Evans had been holding under his nose.

Doyle said, "Yeah, let's see the rest of 'em he picked these out of."

Evans gave Tom a hard look. "Why don't you let us do the talking? We'll tell him anything we think he needs to know."

Tom didn't answer, so I chipped in, "What's so secret about it? She did die, didn't she, or are we having hallucinations?"

Doyle, who seemed to have it in for me, growled softly out of the corner of his mouth, "One more twenty-five-cent word like that outa you, and I'll send you home with a note to your mother."

The florist pushed back a glass slide and showed us triple tiers of long-stemmed roses. They had a blue light shining on them—why blue I don't know, either to make them look pretty or they were ultra-violet rays to take the place of sunlight. "They came out of here," he said nervously, "but I'm sure you won't find anything the mat—"

Doyle reached in and said, "Mind if we take a few samples for the research lab? Nothing like making sure. And don't sell any more of them till we get the results—that's a police order."

The poor florist acted as if he wanted to break down and cry. "They'll be a total loss—you're quarantining one of the most perishable items I carry in stock!"

"Watch it," Evans advised his pal, who was pawing at them clumsily. "Don't get a puncture like she did."

"In which case," I murmured softly, "the poor rose'll probably be the one to curl up and die."

Doyle blew up, violently and completely. I seemed to have that sort of effect on him. "This jerk," he yelled at his partner, "is getting in my hair! Do we have to have him along, what's he doing here with us anyway?"

"Slumming," I said nastily.

Evans didn't seem interested in this side-feud. "How is it," he drawled indifferently, "you didn't put a card with them when you bought them, Mr. Nye?" But he was looking straight at the florist and not Tom as he asked it.

"I didn't have one with me, and I was in a hurry to get down there—we were late as it was. It was my engagement party, after all."

The jittery shop-owner, whom Evans was watching, didn't seem to have any control over his eye-, eyebrow-, or lip-muscles; they all moved simultaneously. Evans didn't wait for the signs to become audible. "Meaning he did write out a card—or what? You told me over the phone he didn't!"

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"N-no; he didn't." He stumbled over it, and yet he seemed to mean it. "Did you, sir?"

"You're talking to us, not him!" Doyle jumped down his throat.

Tom was standing over by some kind of a potted plant, idly poking his index finger into the soft mold around the bottom. I could see him getting sorer by the minute; a pulse in his jaw started bobbing up and down. He looked hard at the florist, then at them. "I didn't," he said irritably, coming back again to where the rest of us were. "What's all this business about a card, anyway? I bought two dozen roses in this shop—without even putting my hands on them, just pointed at the ones I wanted. I didn't take them down there with me, didn't even lay eyes on them again, until you two men brought them back here. Am I supposed to have doctored them up or something? With what object? To—to endanger the girl that's going to be my wife?"

Loyal-friend-like, I gave them a dirty look, most of it for Doyle. "They've got to make a mystery out of it, that's what detectives are for," I said scathingly. "You and I, Tom, we're just laymen. It'd be obvious to us, or to anybody else for that matter, what must have happened. Some sort of spray or insecticide was used on them and wasn't properly removed afterward. That's all there is to it, just a frightful accident. But of course that isn't enough for our fine feathered friends here, they've got to go around wanting to know why you didn't send a copy of your birth certificate down there with them!"

Doyle threw down the flowers and stepped up close. "I don't like your face," he said, "and haven't all evening! Here's where I change it around a little!" And he swung back, in good old 1890 style.

"Fine!" I said agreeably, "but not in here where there's so much glass. There's a perfectly good sidewalk outside—"

"Not there or anyplace else," said Evans, getting in between the two of us. "Grow up, Doyle." And to me he remarked less than affably, "You're excused, Mr. Walsh. We can get along without your company, if you don't mind. We're just a pair of ignorant dicks, I know, and you could carry out our routine much better; that's why we're being paid and you're not. The police lab will tell the story; shoot out there with those roses, Doyle. Keep the two bunches separate."

Tom and the two dicks got back in the cab and left me behind. Evans wanted to ask Tom a few more questions at Headquarters—again it was a request, not an order.

"See you up at the place later," he said to me. "Leave the key under the mat if you turn in before I get home."

It had been warm in the flower shop and I'd taken off my gloves and crammed them in my pocket

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while we were in there. When I started to put them on again, I saw that one had fallen out. I turned around and went in again abruptly.

The proprietor, who evidently hadn't got over the effects of our visit yet, gave a jump when he saw me show up again. I wouldn't have thought anything of it, but he happened to be standing close to that potted plant when he did so.

"I dropped a glove," I said, but I let him look around for it. I looked, instead, at the finger-holes Tom had absent-mindedly punched into the mold around the plant when that card business had come up.

"Here it is, I've found it," he said. He meant the glove, but I suited my action to his words and pulled a hundred-dollar bill, rolled into a cylinder, out of one of the finger-holes. He promptly dropped the glove a second time—and a lot of complexion with it.

"What was he slipping you this for?" I asked quietly.

"Why, I'm sure he didn't mean that for me! He must have dropped that in there by m-mistake—"

"Oh, no," I said. "He gave you a hard look just then, I saw him. I thought he was sore at the time, but it must have been a signal. Not to tell—what?"

He didn't know, hadn't any idea —all that sort of stuff.

"You're not thinking hard enough," I chided. "I'm his friend. Wouldn't you prefer to tell me and keep it sort of *en famille!* Or suppose I page those two missing links and let them start the whole thing over again?"

I wouldn't have dreamed of doing it, because this didn't look so hot for Tom. They'd gone already, anyway, but the florist didn't know that.

Since then, people have said to me: Why didn't you butt out? Why be nosey? I mean, what business was it of yours whether your friend had left a century-note in a florist shop or not? Well, that's just the whole point. If he'd been only an acquaintance, I certainly wouldn't have snooped. He was like a brother to me; either you get the idea or you don't.

He gave in rather than face the detectives again. "I'm really not absolutely certain what he meant by it," he stammered, and possibly he was telling the truth, "but I judge, I imagine, he didn't want the second two-dozen roses mentioned—in front of them. So I didn't."

Tom evidently hadn't, if there'd been any such, because he'd neglected even to mention them to me. "I imagine so," I agreed, as though I'd been in on it all along.

He wasn't sure I had been, though, I could see that; the mere fact I'd cross-questioned him about the bride made him wonder. "You know about the other young lady of course?" he said hopefully.

I did now. And it wasn't in character at all. I nodded noncommittally.

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He shrugged, trying to appear sophisticated. "I know how those things are, young fellows about town like you. But if I'd told *them,* right away it would have been in the papers—one of those gossip columns maybe—how he sent flowers to his ex the same night he was getting engaged. Get him in hot water. That's why I caught on and shut up about it."

I'd been racking my brains. But there wasn't really much of a list to check. "Fortescue?"

"Yes, on 54th, over by the river."

"You don't have to tell me," I assured him. "Same messenger take them to both places?"

"Yes, he stopped off there first, then went on to the Park-Ashley."

I locked my teeth. "Why, that devil!" I thought. "Is it possible she snagged them away from him—the second bunch—long enough to do something to them, hoping to harm Marcia? She must have caught on whom they were for, no trick to that at all; pumped the kid." I walloped my gloves viciously against the edge of the case. "I'm going down there," I said to myself, "now—right now! Dirty little murderess!"

I speared my finger toward him, with the century curled around it the way it must have been curled around Tom's when he stuck it into the mold. "Well, this is yours," I said disapprovingly. "He seemed to want you to have it—and it's his money, not mine."

He took it; I would have collapsed if he hadn't. "D'you think I'll get in trouble?" he wanted to know. "They didn't *ask* me point-blank, you know—"

I wasn't interested. "See you around," I said, and went out.

I got in a cab and went down seven blocks to 54th and over five to the river. I thought: Would that torch-bearer be capable of doing a thing like that? But how had she known ahead of time he was going to send her flowers? How had she managed to have—whatever it was—ready? Was she a modern Lucretia Borgia or something? And yet it didn't seem possible she'd kept the messenger boy waiting there any length of time, Marcia's flowers had got down to the hotel ahead of us, and we'd had just a straight ride in a taxi.

I vowed, I'll knock all her front teeth out with my own little fist, if I find out—! And *that* sap—I thought he knew his way around!

But the sight of Third Avenue through the cab window seemed to bring out the good old-fashioned qualities in me, the sense of fair-play and even a vestige of chivalry that I hadn't known was left in me.

She hasn't brains enough, I told myself. Her speed would be to try to have him beaten up, as she did once before. Why jump at conclusions? That's what comes of associating with detectives, even for half an hour!

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Simply an accident—and what's more, if one bunch was tainted, then the whole consignment was, and she's in danger of having the same thing happen to her if she fools around with them. So between wanting to sock her in the teeth and wanting to save her life, I was in a hurry to get over there.

"That pretty color up ahead," he said sarcastically, "is red. They put it on just to make the street look nice. It don't mean a thing. This your first time in a New York cab, Mac?"

"Did I ask you for a civil service examination?" I flared. "You've talked yourself out of a tip."

"You were just looking for an excuse to welsh," he let me know. "Just for that you can open the door yourself. No tip, no service."

I didn't seem to get along with anyone tonight. I got out, bent down, and put sixty cents on the curbstone just out of reach. "You can get out and pick it up if you want it!" I said.

A bedecked janissary inside the Taj Mahal (the décor suggested that, with just a dash of the Colosseum) wanted to know who was calling on Miss Fortescue.

"Mr. Tom Nye," I said unblushingly.

It was all right, it seemed, for Mr. Tom Nye to go up. Whether it would have been just as all right for Mr. Dick Walsh, I doubted.

I tipped my hat elaborately—upstairs. Well, at least *her* roses hadn't played a dirty trick on her. "Hi, Fritzie," I greeted her.

"What's the idea?" she said huskily. "Don't you know your own name any more?"

"I know how it is," I soothed her, "a nickel's worth of last-minute perfume behind the ears shot to hell. And all the sofa pillows punched together for nothing. Wouldn't I do for a stand-in, at least?"

"Don't get wise," she said sultrily. "You're jealous 'cause you never got to first base, that's all."

She never poisoned anyone, I told myself; just a child of nature. I walked past her as though I owned the place. "My, what nice flowers," I said. "And so tastefully arranged too." I sat down, flattened my hat with my elbow.

She took something out of the folds of her negligee, stuck it under one of the pillows, sat back against it. I caught a flash through her fingers, though.

"Mmm," I said, "so he *was* going to get flowers—in a different way, without being able to smell them. I thought you liked him."

"What's on your mind," she said wearily. "Do I have to sit here all night and listen to you talk like Noel Coward?"

She had one rose pinned to the shoulder of her negligee. There was another spray of them arranged in a flat blue bowl near me. I pulled one out—with a wicked thorn sticking up from its stem—

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started to play around with it. Prodded it gently with my thumb, watching her, but not hard enough to break the skin, I assure you.

Judging by her look, she didn't seem to give a rap whether I lived or died—not even if it happened right there on her premises. So I quit doing it, because I did give a rap. I pitched the thing over my shoulder.

"Why did you figure you'd need a gun if he came here to see you tonight?" Doyle couldn't have done it any better. "What made you afraid of him?"

She looked hostile, rather than frightened or guilty. "That's a good one! What've I ever done to make me afraid of him? When haven't I been afraid of him?"

Which didn't make sense to me. "Well, when haven't you?" I parroted.

"Not since after I first found out —" Then she let it down easy. "A few things about him."

There was a tap at the door. One of those prearranged taps, I got the feeling. She went over and opened it and the janissary was standing there. He didn't say anything, just looked at her.

"No, it's all right," she said, "it wasn't Mr. Nye." So she'd coached him over the house phone before she let me in. "Look in on me in a minute or two—I might need you."

Meanwhile I switched the gun to under my own pillow.

She came back and said to me, "You know, I ought to go to the police. I should have long ago."

I knew how she meant it, but I distorted the meaning. "You ought to," I agreed. "And maybe you will yet before the night's over."

"If he comes near me again I will."

"No, it's not a case of his coming near you. You know, a young girl died down there tonight—"

She took it big. Closed her eyes and let her head loll back and put the back of one hand between her eyes. "Oh my God!" she shuddered, "Oh, that poor girl—I should have phoned—oh, if I'd only had the courage to phone! I was afraid, oh I was so afraid—" She got up and did a couple of half-turns, this way and that. "I've really killed her—I'm to blame—"

"Now Dickie," I said softly to myself, "we're really getting somewhere. And Doyle thinks he's so hot! Why, there's nothing to it!"

"I've got to have a drink!" she shivered, and poured herself enough to launch a battleship.

"Have one on me too," I encouraged when she'd downed it without stopping to breathe. "And then I suppose it'll be up to me to call the police or something. Although I hate to be a snitcher. Maybe I'll let them do their own dirty work."

She looked at me and I looked back at her.

"So you should have phoned!" I mimicked. "That and a couple of

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other little things. I'll tell you what you should have done! You should have let those flowers alone—then there wouldn't have been anything to phone about. You'll probably get away with it at that. 'Beautiful love slave mad with jealousy. I didn't know what I was doing, I didn't want her to have him.'"

The second drink fell out of her hand and parted over her satin slippers like a gold wave. "What are you talking about?" she said in a stifled voice. "Flowers—" She gestured vaguely at the ones scattered around. "—what've they got to do with it?"

"You put something on them, didn't you, and then sent them on to her from here."

"I!" She screamed it. "I got them from him!" She glanced in horrified fascination down at the one on her shoulder. "Is that how—what happened to Marcia Planter anyway?"

"Not Marcia, her younger sister. But at least you admit whom you intended it for—which is no news to me. Why ask what happened? Something deadly on their stems got into her bloodstream—" I snapped my fingers. "Or didn't you intend to go quite that far—did you just want to give her prickly heat and spoil her beauty? Amateurs shouldn't experiment with poisons—"

But she had no more time for words. I think, woman-like, my latter suggestion had frightened her even more than the thought of death itself. She was afraid to take the thing off her, the one pinned to her negligee, or touch it with her fingertips in any way; so she started pulling and tearing the whole flimsy off her shoulders. And as she did so, she kept giving little bleating wails and side-stepping around in a macabre sort of rhumba.

It should have been excruciatingly funny; it wasn't of course anything of the kind. "Stand still!" I ordered and caught at her. "You'll make it happen twice as quickly that way! I'll get it off for you—"

I pulled the pin out carefully, and the thing dropped of its own weight and I kicked it away with my foot.

"So you didn't have a hand in it," I said, sitting down again. What else was there to say—after what I'd just seen? Tallulah Bankhead would have been just as convincing, but not without a rehearsal or two.

She was all in; she reached up and pushed her hair out of the way. "But why *before?*" she said. "Why *before*—tonight was only the engagement, wasn't it? I thought it was after their marriage that—that she had to worry about."

She poured us each a drink this time.

"There are two sides to the story," she said, when she was down to the ice cube in her glass. "Mine—and the one you've heard from him, or gathered from what he'd let drop. I know about that,

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because he's said to me, 'Dick thinks I'm off you. All the better, let him think so.' I can just about imagine what his side of it is—that he cooled off, that I've been running after him ever since, that I even sent some friends of mine to beat him up. Now listen to my side of it—and it's not a pretty story.

"I did go for him, I was sold on him. Then one night a year ago we were sitting here eating apples. I'd given him a fruit knife to pare them with. All of a sudden without any warning he had me pinned down here in a corner of this same sofa we're sitting on and was bending over me with that knife aimed at my throat. No rational reason, no jealousy, nothing like that—just a sudden urge. One look at his eyes, and I knew enough not to struggle. I just lay there limp, talking to him quietly, saying, 'You don't want to do that—wait'll tomorrow night—'. Oh, anything that came into my head. Dick Walsh, it was a solid hour before I got him to put it down and take up his things and leave. When I got the door locked after him, I fell in the most beautiful faint you've ever seen—just behind it.

"It happened once again, about a month later. Not quite as bad. I was laughing and had my head back. 'Gee what a soft little neck you've got,' he said, and closed his hands around it, sort of measuring it. He didn't put on any pressure, and I distracted his attention by pointing to something behind him.

"I bought this gun the next day, and I've never received him without it since. Walsh, I knew then and I've known ever since—that your friend has a streak of homicidal mania in him. He's probably fighting it, but it's growing stronger all the time, and it's going to come out some day—"

"I've known him since we were both in school," I said. "You're talking nonsense!"

She said bitterly, "A man can go through college with another man, room with him for years, be slated for best man at his wedding, but when it comes to knowing that other man, the hidden recesses of the mind, the dark quirks revealed in unguarded moments, it takes a woman."

"Why didn't you drop him then?"

"I was afraid to. Afraid he'd turn on me and get me for sure if I antagonized him in any way. I couldn't face it, the thought that he might be lurking downstairs by the door some night when I came home, or get himself admitted up here and wait for me hidden in a closet. I told a couple of small-time racketeer friends of mine about it, and they went out to beat him up. That was their own idea, not mine. That scared me even worse. I begged them to lay off, let me handle it."

"Why didn't you go to the police, then?"

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"Walsh," she said drily, "a girl like me has no social standing, she has to take her chances. Besides, he never actually threatened me—it was just that I never knew from one visit to the next when the thing was going to pop through the veneer of sanity that's hidden it so well from you and everyone else.

"When he first started going with Miss Planter, all I could think of was that meant an out for me, that I'd finally get rid of him. I wanted to ring bells and blow whistles. But it was still there, only it had switched over to her. I'm a nice comfortable sort of person; other guys don't hide much from me, I guess I had the same effect on him. He started in by saying that he still liked me better than her, but that he'd have to marry her because she had all kinds of dough. Then pretty soon he was saying that he'd come back to me and show me what he really thought of me, once he got his hands on that dough. Leaving it sort of indefinite what would happen to her. Then finally it became less and less indefinite, until I couldn't help knowing what he meant. He didn't say it in so many words, but you couldn't mistake his meaning—he was going to get rid of her some fine day—"

I got my own drink this time. She was getting under my skin, but every pore was fighting her.

"That's bad enough," she said, "that set-up. But there's something worse to it, something worse than that. The real horror of it, is, he doesn't *really* want Marcia's money, he doesn't *really* want me. He just wants to kill someone. He's sick in the head. Oh, I looked into his eyes for sixty minutes that night, with a sharp knife at my windpipe, and no one can tell me different! If it isn't her, it'll be someone else, sometime, somewhere—"

I hated her for doing this to me. "Proof," I said huskily. "Proof. I've got to have proof. You've destroyed my confidence in him forever, damn you. But still I only have your say-so, your suspicions to go by. I'm with him day and night, and I've never noticed anything. I've fallen between two stools now. You can't leave me like this."

"I'll give you proof," she said. She got up and looked frightened, as if she were trying to get up her courage. "I called him up once tonight. You were there. You didn't hear what he said to me, though, did you?" She went over and dialed Butterfield 8-1200, our number. I read the slots over her shoulder.

"Don't ever tell him," she breathed. "For God's sake, don't ever let him know about this—or I'm finished."

She sat down on the bench, and I sat down on it the opposite way with my head affectionately on her shoulder. We weren't thinking of love, we were both listening to the

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same receiver. I was shaking a little.

He got on and she said, "Hello, Tommy dear. Did I get you out of bed?"

"Who is this, Fritzie? No, I just got in," he told her. "I've been down at Police Headquarters until half an hour ago. Did you hear what happened?"

She looked at me quickly and I shook my head; it mightn't be in the papers yet. She said no, and he told her. He told her that the report from the chemical lab had come in while he was there—some kind of experimental stuff they'd been trying out for a weed killer at the hothouses had got on them by accident; they'd gone down there now to destroy all the rest of the bushes, and were sending out a warning to all the florists around town. "Walsh said that from the beginning," I heard him say "but for a time they had me feeling damned uncomfortable."

She gave me a look, but I didn't call that proof. "And will this delay your wedding?" she led him on.

"Not if I've got anything to say about it," he answered.

"So it looks like I've got to lose you after all," she crooned.

"I'll be back at your door in six months, darling—a widower," he whispered.

An electric current went through me. Her eyes met mine; hers were frightened, seemed to say "I told you so"; mine must have been horrified, incredulous.

"You don't really mean—those things you've been saying all along," she said, to spur him on.

But he was too cagey. "I don't want to talk any more over the phone. See you soon."

The more we drank, the less able we were to get drunk. "Proof enough?" she shivered.

I drew my hand across my mouth, as though I had a bad taste.

"It's in him," she said. "And if it isn't her, it'll be somebody else."

"Wait a minute! Wait a minute!" I breathed it as though afraid of the sound of my own voice. "D'you remember when that Andrea girl was killed about a year and a half ago—that case that was never cleared up—did you know him then? He got all excited, dwelt on it—it was all he could talk about for days—"

"Yes, yes!" she agreed. "I noticed that too. He came to see me the night after it happened. He brought in three papers with him, not one, and sat and read every word in them aloud to me. His face was all flushed, he seemed to get a thrill—"

"You scratched him that night, didn't you—no, it was the night before that he came home from here all marked up. I first saw it that morning, and he laughed and told me how 'emotional' you'd gotten —"

She put an ice-cold hand on my

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wrist, so cold I jumped at the touch of it. "He wasn't with me the night before. By all that's holy I swear it! I was out at a bar with another man when the news of the Andrea girl came over the radio. I didn't give him those marks. I noticed them myself the second night—he told me they came from a new electric razor he'd just bought—'burns' he called them—"

I said it so low it's a wonder she heard me. "He's never owned one."

We were awfully quiet, awfully scared. We were both thinking the same thing. We didn't want to know for sure; I had to go back and sleep under the same roof with him, she had to receive him the next time he took it into his head to drop in on her. We didn't want to know for sure . . .

I left at three that morning. I left an entirely different girl from the one I'd called on before midnight. I'd called on a slinky, jealousy-crazed dame, who had pursued the life out of my room-mate and wasn't ready to give him up even yet, not if she had to murder her rival. I came away from a girl who was no plaster saint, who wouldn't have thought of refusing a "present" from an admirer when it was offered in the right spirit, but who, far from pursuing Tom, had been living under the shadow of death's wing for the past year or more, had never received him without having a gun handy, ever since she'd found out—

I came away with that gun of hers—she had urged me to take it with me. "I'm going to get out of here," she said. "First thing in the morning! He'll find out sooner or later I told you—"

"No, he won't," I said. "He won't come near you again, don't worry."

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "He's—my friend."

Her "What are you going to do?" followed me away from the place. I didn't know what to do. He hadn't poisoned those flowers, he hadn't done anything. He was *going* to do things—some day. Fritzi and I both knew that. An accident that looked like murder had revealed—a real murder, in the future, not yet committed. That and a suspicion of murder already committed, in the past.

I couldn't go to the police; he hadn't done anything they could hold him for. I couldn't just sit by either, and watch Marcia Planter or some other girl drift slowly to her doom. I had my own life to live, but I'm funny that way. I couldn't have gone through the months and years with that hanging over me, not knowing when—

It would have been better not to know. But I knew now. And I didn't know what to do.

The key was under the mat when I got back. That riled me for some strange reason. I felt he should have cowered behind a

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locked door, away from me and what I'd found out. I made faces while I unlocked, closed the door again after me. Faces like a guy going into a place where there's vermin.

I gave the foyer the lights, took off my topper, shied it into the dark living room, not caring if I ever saw it again. I went in through the open bedroom door and gave that the lights. He was sound asleep, a long cylinder under the covers, on the bed nearest the window.

I stood there looking at the place, looking at him. A fistful of change and crumpled bills on the dresser, where my jack always went too at nights. How many times we'd had a friendly row the next morning, trying to separate the two. "That fin was mine, y' highway robber! You only had singles!" Each feeling at the same time that the other guy would have given him the shirt off his back.

I'm not trying to be stagey, but put yourself in my place. A thousand pictures flashed through my mind, like a shell-shocked newsreel. The two of us in the Varsity Show. At proms. Trying out for football. Boning for exams. Getting chased in a second-hand roadster by a motorcycle cop. Standing together on the stag line at a hundred deb-parties, both going for the same wows and both dodging the same clucks.

And now, here he was. Showing a rotten spot, like an apple. Not showing it, rather, but having it in him. It didn't make me want to break down and cry; it had just the opposite effect, made me sore as blazes—because it was such a dirty trick on me, I guess.

"Get up," I growled. "Get up, you!" My voice rose as I went along. "Get up and get out of here before I—"

He was awake then, startled, blinking at me. "What's the matter with you—one too many?"

"Get out of here—beat it!" My mouth felt all lopsided. "You dirty murderer!"

"You've gone crazy," he said. "What happened to those flowers was an accident. I waited down there till they had a full report on it—"

"Yes," I said bitterly, "that's the joke of it. An accident came along, and through a chain of circumstances revealed a murder—in the making! A murder that hasn't happened yet—that I'm going to see doesn't happen!"

I slewed a chair around, sat down heavily on it, took out Fritzie's gun, and broke it open. I took out a bullet and put it in my pocket.

He made a move toward his trousers. "No, wait!" I said. "You'll go back to her, won't you, that poor little Fortescue hustler, and you'll do her in—for telling me!"

I took out a second bullet. "Or you'll go to Marcia Planter and

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you'll say, 'Let's get married right away, let's give them all the slip and leave town.' And then some fine day she'll have an accident, won't she—fall out of a window or be swept overboard from a ship—"

I took out the third bullet and put that away. "No, she won't! She loves and trusts you, she deserves a better break than that."

"That lying little—" he said.

"You spoke into my ear over the phone an hour ago." I took out the fourth bullet. "And it isn't even that—I'd steer clear of you maybe, if it was just the money. But it's killing for the sake of killing . . . I saw how you ate up the papers when the Andrea girl was throttled. I don't know if you did that or not, and I don't want to know."

I took out the fifth bullet, and I clicked the gun closed.

"Whether you did or not, one thing's sure. The insulation had already started to wear thin by that time. And now there's not very much left. It's going to be someone—real soon. Maybe someone you haven't even met yet. The guy I went through school with, that I've roomed with all these years, wouldn't want that to happen—even if you do. Only Fritzie and I know."

I stood up and looked at him, and he looked back at me. "And she's—nobody. And I'm—your friend. Still your friend. Think it over."

I pitched the gun away from me onto his bed.

I turned and went to the door. "Think it over," I said, without looking at him any more. I closed it after me and went out.

It hit me awfully quick. I'd hardly got halfway through the small-sized foyer outside when it hit me. Seemed to hit me in the back and lift my heels clear of the floor. A boom that rattled the closed bedroom door on its hinges.

I didn't look around. I went over to the phone and dialed Headquarters. I asked for Doyle, why I don't know. I guess I wanted to talk to somebody I knew, no matter how slightly, rather than just some stranger.

He was still there and they got him for me.

I said dully, "This is Dick Walsh—I don't know if you remember me or not, from the Park-Ashley and the florist shop tonight—"

He liked me as much as ever. "Sure I do," he said sarcastically. "The amateur detective!"

"My friend just had an accident, better come around." Something like a sob came into my throat without my meaning it to. "You can have your job. I'll never play detective again."

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This is the 253rd "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . An interesting and provocative "first story" —and what is its strange narrative grip?

The author was 29 when he submitted "Thank You, Mr. Thurston" to EQMM. Earlier in his career he had sold a nonfiction piece to "1000 Jokes Magazine," and this event had changed Mr. Dumonte's life—it had turned him irrevocably to writing; but, alas, until EQMM purchased "Thank You, Mr. Thurston," Mr. Dumonte's "unpublished stuff accumulated in unsightly heaps in the back of a closet."

The author has lived in Chicago, New York City, Miami, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Milwaukee; and, "courtesy of the U.S. Army," in Korea, Japan, and Guam. He has worked in radio and in the theater, and more recently was editor of what he described as a "cow-college newspaper and magazine" . . . So Mr. Dumonte has "got around," and from his wanderings will come, we are sure, many tales . . .

THANK YOU, MR. THURSTON

by ED DUMONTE

THEY ALL TOLD ME, "MR. THURSton can help you." When I took my pictures to dealers or collectors or to other artists they all said, "See Mr. Thurston—he will know what to do."

But how could I? Alone and friendless in the city, I had no influence, no channel of communication, to a man of Mr. Thurston's stature and importance. I understand this now. But I wasted many weeks sitting in the anteroom of Mr. Thurston's office. Each morning I rolled up several of my best canvases and went to Mr. Thurston's office to wait.

"Mr. Thurston sees no one without an appointment," the girl would tell me. Or "Mr. Thurston will be in conference all day."

All the mornings and all the afternoons of all the days I waited patiently, hopefully, and I never got so much as a glimpse of Mr. Thurston. At last my money ran out and I had to take my paintings into the streets again—to display on fences and trees.

But I didn't stop trying to get Mr. Thurston's attention. Everybody knows that an artist has no chance of getting a showing or any critical attention unless he can win the patronage of some great man. Perhaps, I reasoned, if I couldn't

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speak for my paintings, my paintings could speak for me.

Among my best works were scenes of the city, done soon after I arrived, while the city was still fresh and beautiful to me. One of my impressions was a skyline of vertical lines and planes done in shades of gray. Another, painted at the waterfront, interpreted the warehouses as cubes of dingy brown, the river as a parallelogram of polluted blue, the whole surmounted and spanned by arches of rust. These were two of the pictures I rolled into a tube and mailed to Mr. Thurston.

After a week my paintings were returned . . . unopened. Stuffed into the wrapping was a note: "Mr. Thurston does not examine unsolicited artwork."

I was almost angered by the note. But when I thought about it, I decided it was reasonable. Mr. Thurston was a great and influential man, his name on every tongue. He must receive thousands of requests for help every week, hundreds of paintings from daubers and Sunday artists. He could hardly be expected to give his valuable time to every unknown artist who called on him.

For a time I puzzled over ways and means of getting to see Mr. Thurston. My problem was solved, I thought, by a prosperous-looking gentleman who one afternoon stopped and examined my street display.

He liked my pictures. They showed depth and feeling, he said. Excellent composition, striking colors. When he asked why I didn't have a dealer to represent me or a gallery to hang my pictures, I told him, and he understood.

Although he had no influence himself, he said, he had a friend who would be most interested in seeing my work. And he wrote me a letter of introduction to Mr. Thurston.

Was it to be that easy, then?

The next day I brushed my suit, applied a bit of black paint to my shoes, and with two paintings under my arm I went back to Mr. Thurston's office. I interrupted one of the familiar excuses to give the secretary my letter. She disappeared into the inner office, returned after a few moments, and handed the letter back to me.

"Mr. Thurston has asked me to tell you that he is acquainted with the writer of this letter, and that his personal distaste for the man is exceeded only by his abhorrence for his judgment of art. Under no circumstances would Mr. Thurston consider sponsoring a piece of work recommended by that man."

As she spoke I flushed with anger; but my anger changed, as I realized what had happened, to embarrassment and shame. I had been duped, tricked by one of Mr. Thurston's enemies, cruelly used as a pawn in some hideous joke. I fled from the office and ran blindly back to my room.

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I lay for hours on my cot, moaning with anguish as the consequences of what I had done became all too clear to me. Foolishly I had let my name be associated with a man whom Mr. Thurston despised, and forever afterward, though innocent of any offense, my name and my work would be attacked by Mr. Thurston as if I too were his enemy.

All that was left to me was to leave the city, leave my oils and brushes, leave my paintings for the janitor's boilers, and try to endure somehow the living-death of the world of non-art. But I was not yet free to go.

If I were ever to know peace I must find *some* way to apologize to Mr. Thurston. Not that he would accept it, for he was a great and important man, and I had offended him beyond endurance. And, too, there was so little I could do. A public apology from a nonentity has no significance. I would gladly have cut off my ear and sent it to him, but he would probably return the package unopened.

The answer came to me in a flash of inspiration. I would do a portrait of Mr. Thurston!—a portrait that would express more clearly than words the respect and admiration I felt for him. A portrait of feeling and sincerity beyond any doubt or question . . .

I immediately started to work, searching newspaper and magazine files for pictures of Mr. Thurston, rereading his famous articles of criticism and opinion. From these fundamentals of likeness and character I made sketches—ten or fifteen sketches to capture the arch of an eyebrow or the shading of a cheekbone. Forty or fifty sketches to find the proper angle of the head and express the character of the chin. Hundreds of sketches to recreate for all the world to see the soul of this great and influential man.

At last I was satisfied with the sketches, and then slowly, painstakingly, I began to commit to canvas the image I had conceived. For days, without food or rest, I fought with mass and color to put a living man into oil—the massive brow illuminated from within by a brilliant intelligence, the eyes that saw beneath the flat surface of canvas to the heart and soul that gave a painting life, the thin lip that curved into an almost cruel disdain for shoddiness or incompetence, the sweeping line of jaw and chin that bespoke the sensitivity of a true critic and connoisseur . . .

When the painting was finished, I carried it to Mr. Thurston's office and left it propped against a chair. Then, wrung dry by exhaustion and the passion of my work, I returned to my room and collapsed into unconsciousness.

I don't know how much later it was or how it came about, but my next memory is of Mr. Thurston himself standing over me, shaking

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the portrait in my face and shouting at me.

"I am accustomed to being hounded by every inconsequential dauber in the city," he said. "If you have been the most persistent, I reasoned that it must be because you were the least talented. When I found this—this atrocity!—in my anteroom I saw that I was right.

"I do not make a practice of offering constructive criticism for every smear of paint I see. But since to do so in your case may save me the further annoyance of being exposed to your work, I shall make this exception. My critical opinion is: stop painting! If you must paint, study under the proper teachers and you may one day be capable of designing wallpaper. You will certainly never rise above that level.

"Use your eyes and whatever sense you may have and you will see the truth of what I say. Compare this—this portrait!—with its subject, for example. Do the frontal lobes of my brain really peep through a gap in my forehead? Do my eyes indeed dangle out of their sockets? Have I somehow missed seeing in my mirror what is apparently a third eye? Are the bones of my jaw as badly broken and dislocated as this—this execrable—this heinous—this shocking—"

Mr. Thurston went on. And on and on. But I was no longer capable of understanding what he said. The very core and fiber of my being had been torn apart and shredded, as by some mighty internal explosion. With excruciating pain and blinding light the truth of all that Mr. Thurston said burst upon me.

It was futile to try to express thoughts and emotions with abstract forms, as I had been doing. My pictures had to look like the objects they represented. It was really so simple . . .

It goes without saying that it was Mr. Thurston's wise and generous criticism that made my paintings the success they are today. A reporter was with the policemen who broke open the door of my room and his newspaper printed photographs of Mr. Thurston lying beside his portrait. Other reporters, too, were kind in describing the likeness as "uncanny," "startling," "an incredible similarity." Art dealers and collectors have been clamoring for more of my work ever since.

Unfortunately the light here is bad and I am kept too busy shuttling between the courtroom and the doctor's examinations to continue my painting. So the portrait of Mr. Thurston will probably be my last painting. That's the opinion of the lawyer assigned to me by the judge; he believes I have only another six weeks or two months left, and I'm too exhausted to complete a major work in that time.

But that's all right. The portrait is my masterpiece.

Thank you, Mr. Thurston.

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR:	**MICHAEL ARLEN**
TITLE:	***Cavalier of the Streets***
TYPE:	Crime Story
LOCALE:	London
TIME:	More than a generation ago
COMMENTS:	*Lest you ever forget the inimitable style of the man who wrote* THE GREEN HAT — *how witty and amusing and sophisticated he could be with words . . .*

IT WAS AS GEORGE TARLYON AND I turned away from Gainsborough's "Musidora Bathing Her Feet," talking loftily about legs, that we were confronted by a tall and dark young man.

"Sir," he addressed Tarlyon, "I would be obliged if you would tell me in which gallery hang the pictures by Manet?"

"Ah," said Tarlyon, "one letter can make so much difference! You are sure you do not mean Monet?"

"Manet," said the dark stranger, and looked as though he meant it.

"I am delighted to meet a man of taste," said Tarlyon heartily. "We, too, were just about to view the Manets. We are partial to Manet. This way."

We followed him like lambs. Tarlyon's knowledge as to where the Manets were took the form of trying every gallery in which the Manets were not.

The dark stranger walked silently and firmly. He was a tall young man of slight but powerful build; his nose, which was of the patrician sort, would have been shapely had it not once been broken in such a way that forever after it must noticeably incline to one side. He carried himself with an air of determination and assurance which would, I thought, make any conversation with him rather a business. His hat, which was soft and had the elegance of the well worn, he wore cavalierly. Shoes by Lobb.

At last a picture rose before our eyes, a large picture, very blue.

Copyright 1923 and 1951 by Michael Arlen; originally titled, "The Broken Nose."

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Now who shall describe that picture which was so blue—blue even to the grass under the soldiers' feet, the complexion of the soldiers' faces, and the rifles in the soldiers' hands? Over against a blue tree stood a solitary soldier, and miserably blue was his face, while the others stood very stiffly with their backs to us, holding their rifles in a position which gave one no room to doubt that they were about to shoot the solitary soldier for some misdemeanor.

"Manet," said Tarlyon proudly.

The dark young stranger was absorbed. He pulled his hat a little lower over his left eye, so that the light should not obtrude on his vision.

"These things happen," he murmured. "And they happen like that." But it was as though he spoke to himself.

"Come on," I whispered to Tarlyon, for we seemed to be intruding—so that I was quite startled when the stranger suddenly turned from the picture to me.

"You see, sir," he said gravely, "I know all about killing. I have killed many men."

"Army Service Corps?" inquired Tarlyon.

"No, sir," snapped the stranger. "I know nothing of your corps. I am a Zeytounli."

"Are you, by God!" cried Tarlyon. I envied him, but could not imitate him.

"Please have patience with me," I begged the stranger. "What is a Zeytounli?"

He regarded me with those smoldering dark eyes; and I realized vividly that his nose had been broken in some argument which had cost the other man more than a broken nose.

"Zeytoun," he said softly, "is a fortress in Armenia. For five hundred years Zeytoun has not laid down her arms, but now she is burnt stones on the ground. The Zeytounlis, sir, are the hill-men of Armenia. I am an Armenian."

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" Tarlyon murmured.

"Why?" snarled the Armenian.

"Well, you've been treated pretty badly, haven't you?" said Tarlyon. "All these massacres and things—"

The stranger glared at him, and then he laughed at him. I shall remember that laugh. So will Tarlyon. Then the stranger raised a finger and, very gently, he tapped Tarlyon's shoulder.

"Listen," said he. "Your manner of speaking bores me. Turks have slain many Armenians. Wherefore Armenians have slain many Turks. You may take it from me that, by sticking to it year in and year out for five hundred years, Armenians have in a tactful way slain more Turks than Turks have slain Armenians. That is why I am proud of being an Armenian. And you would oblige me, gentlemen, by informing your countrymen that we have no use for their discarded

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trousers, but would be grateful for some guns. And you would still further oblige me by trying, in future, not to talk nonsense about Armenians. Adieu, gentlemen. You will probably hear of me again."

He left us.

"I didn't know," I murmured, "that Armenians were like that. I have been misled about Armenians. And he speaks English very well."

"Hum," said Tarlyon thoughtfully. "But no one would say he was Armenian if he wasn't, would he?"

"Also," said I, "he is the most aggressive young man I have ever met. Manet, indeed!"

"So would you be aggressive," Tarlyon snorted, "if you had been massacred and made an atrocity of ever since you were a slip of a boy, and had spent your holidays being chased round Lake Van by roaring Turks and hairy Kurds with scimitars dripping with the blood of Circassian children."

"All the same," I suggested, "it must be pretty restless for the Turks living in the same suburbs with a crowd of young men like that. I would go a long way round on a dark night to avoid meeting that young man, just in case he might be in a bad temper."

If anyone told me the tale of our second meeting with the Zeytounli that very night, and of its consequencies, I might humor him, but I would not believe him. But this is what actually happened, toward midnight of that very day, within a stone's throw of Claridge's Hotel, in Brook Street, Mayfair.

George Tarlyon and I had been of the same company for dinner and then bridge at a house in Brook Street. Toward midnight, a gap in the bridge allowed us to slip away, which we did, refusing a last glass of barley-water with passionate restraint.

Tarlyon had parked his car outside Claridge's, and thither we walked. Brook Street, at that hour, is undecided between a state of coma and one of glittering abandon; which means that the deathly silence is every now and then shattered by rich automobiles hurling themselves and lovely ladies all covered in pearls and chrysoprase into the bosom of Grosvenor Square.

Claridge's, of course, hath music, so that youth may dance. But of pedestrians along Brook Street there are less than a few, and of young men in gents' evening wear running furiously after limousines there is a noticeable scarcity.

He simply tore past us, that young man, in the middle of the road, a few yards behind a swiftly going car. The car stopped near Grosvenor Square. We were more than fifty yards away, and could not determine whether it was a man or a woman who emerged from the car and entered the house, but it looked like a fat little man. Then the car slid away. The pursuing young man had disappeared.

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"He can't have been doing it for fun," said Tarlyon.

"Perhaps he's gone to have a bath," I suggested. For it was a very warm night, and running after motor cars must have been a wet business.

"We'll see," said Tarlyon. We retraced our steps up Brook Street, and passed the house into which the occupant of the car had disappeared. It was a house like another, dark and silent; and as it stood almost at the corner, we went round the corner into Grosvenor Square; at least we were rounding the corner when a young man in a great hurry collided with us.

"Ah!" said Tarlyon.

"Sorry," said the stranger. I was right about the running—it had made his face very wet.

"So it's you!" said Tarlyon.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said the Armenian, with a sort of furious courtesy. "If you will excuse me, I am in a hurry." He made to pass us.

"We noticed it," said Tarlyon. "In fact, we noticed nothing else."

"Damn!" snapped the Armenian. "So you saw me running!"

"So did he," I murmured, looking up Brook Street. A policeman was sauntering toward us.

"If you don't want to be asked any questions by the arm of the law," Tarlyon suggested, "you had better take a turn round the square with us."

"I won't move," the stranger cried passionately. "I have found him at last—I won't move."

"But neither will he," I soothed him. "He's gone into the house."

"Did you see him go in?"

We nodded.

"Ah, but his Excellency is clever!" said the Armenian viciously.

We grabbed hold of him and hauled him round the square. He never even pretended that he liked our company.

"I suppose," said Tarlyon, "you've got bombs all over you."

"Sir," said the Armenian, "you are a fool. Do I look the kind of man to carry bombs? I favor the revolver."

"Oh, do you?" said I.

Sarcastic I was, you understand.

"And one shot is always enough."

I gave up.

"And where," asked Tarlyon reasonably, "does his Excellency come in?"

"He won't come in anywhere after tonight. His Excellency is going to die."

And with that the Armenian suddenly stopped in his unwilling stride and looked from one to the other of us. His broken nose made fantasy of his dark face, but I remember thinking it must once have been a handsome enough face of its kind, for not even a broken nose made him ugly. He was as tall as Tarlyon, but much slighter; his was a dangerous thinness.

He addressed Tarlyon. "Sir," he said, "you have intruded your com-

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pany on me, but I have accepted you. I have trusted you. I have treated you as gentlemen, being by nature an optimist, and I take it for granted that you will neither betray me nor try to deter me. You will understand the strength of my intention when I say that a young girl is concerned in this, that I have sworn a vow, and that if you were in my position you would do what I am going to do. Good night, gentlemen."

"Hold on," cried Tarlyon. "What on earth were you chasing that car for? And who the devil is his Excellency? We'd like to know, you see, so as to be able to pick him out from among the other murders in tomorrow's papers."

"Achmed Jzzit Pasha, the Young Turk," said the Armenian softly.

"Ah!" said George Tarlyon. "I see. Enver Pasha, Talaat Pasha, and Achmed Jzzit Pasha of the Committee of Union and Progress. I see. Talaat Pasha has already been killed, hasn't he?"

"Three of us," said the Armenian somberly, "set out from Armenia last year, and each of us had a mission of revenge. One of us—you will remember?—shot and killed Talaat Pasha in a street in Berlin some months ago. Enver Pasha has fled to Bokhara. A murder has been arranged, and will shortly take place in Bokhara. And I, at last, have found Achmed Jzzit, the foulest murderer of all. There is not an Armenian in the world who would not shoot Achmed Jzzit Pasha on sight if he had the chance—but Armenians who come to Western countries at once acquire the nasty Western habit of money-grubbing and forget the glory there is in killing. But I, a Zeytounli, have never forgotten it."

"Were you," I asked, "educated at an English public school?"

"That is a matter of opinion. But even an English public school could not make me forget that I am an Armenian, and that an Armenian's first business is to kill Turks; failing Turks, he can, of course, kill Kurds or ravish Circassian maidens—"

"Oh, not Circassian!" I pleaded.

"Well, Albanian," he allowed me. "During the war I fought through the siege and destruction of Zeytoun, and then as an irregular under Andranik; and since the war I have pursued Achmed Jzzit Pasha—and tonight I have found him. He has been here in London for some months, but under an assumed name, for he knows that he is marked by the Dashnakists and the Henchakists, and he is afraid. I will cure him of his fear forever."

And with a wrench his arms were free of our gently restraining hands and he was off down the square. But Tarlyon was swift, very swift; I panted up just as he was again "intruding himself" on the Armenian.

"You don't seem to realize," breathed Tarlyon, "that you can't

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enter a house in Brook Street, kill a pasha, and get away—"

"I don't care if I get away or not," the other broke in fiercely. "Besides, my friend who killed Talaat in Berlin was acquitted. So will you please excuse me, sir?"

It was marvelous what venom that broken-nosed young man could put into a simple question!

"I've taken rather a fancy to you," murmured Tarlyon, "and I hate to think of your going off murdering pashas. Come and have a drink instead, there's a good fellow."

"If I tell you," snapped the Armenian, "that there is a girl in that house, and that I must rescue that girl, then you will perhaps see your way to minding your own business."

"Has the pasha got your girl?" I asked kindly.

"She is my sister, O fool," he said wearily. "And do you think I can allow my little sister to stay in that loathsome old creature's house one night more than I can help?"

"Collar him," said Tarlyon to me; and I grabbed that young man's other arm, though I didn't in the least want to, and we began hauling him round the square again. As I walked close to him I could feel a solid bulky thing in his hip pocket.

"Now," said Tarlyon, very businesslike, "what's all this about your sister?"

The Armenian almost screamed with impatience.

"Have I not told you all along that if you were in my position you would do exactly what I am going to do? Must I explain to you that my little sister was carried away by that old lecher before my eyes? Must I tell you how Zeytoun on the hill was at last shelled to dust by the batteries of two army corps under Achmed Jzzit Pasha, and how the Turks entered the smoking town and gave no quarter to man, woman, or child? Must I, just to satisfy your useless and asinine curiosity, ravage my heart with retelling how my father and mother were bayoneted before my eyes, and how I escaped only because they thought me already dead?

"Must I tell you how my little sister was carried away to the harem of Achmed Jzzit Pasha, who, on beholding her, straightway swore a mighty oath that he would not rest until he had ravished her? Did she give way? The slaying went on, day by day and night by night, so that a count of the leaves of the trees in your Green Park would make but a fraction of the number of the dead bodies that lay rotting in the plain of Mush. An expert killer was Achmed Jzzit Pasha; and whether or not the blood lust of the Osmanli was heightened by his oath to ravish my sister, I do not know, but I do know that there has not been such a tale of dead Christians since Timur passed through the land to meet Bajazet.

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"And that is the man who holds my sister in that house while you detain me here with vain questions and idiotic comments. I followed him to Paris, but he escaped me. I found him in Bournemouth, but again I withheld my hand while I planned some way of rescuing Anaïs—fool that I was! But the idea in my head was that I must first get the girl to some place of safety—and then come back, kill him, and pay whatever is the penalty in your country for killing a loathsome animal. But now I have realized that there is no other way of rescuing Anaïs but by killing him first. Always, wherever he goes, he keeps her locked in a room next to his, and thus it must be in this house. Bestial fancies seethe in his brain, and he sleeps lightly. And while the night is dwindling, here I stand satisfying your idle curiosity. You really must excuse me now, gentlemen."

"But hold on!" cried Tarlyon. "Why kill the wretched man at all? Why not rescue your sister with the charming name and let him go on being a pasha unitl he dies a horrible death by reason of those bestial fancies which you mentioned? He won't dare come after her—and I don't see much point in getting your sister back if you have got to swing for it more or less at once. Eh, Ralph?"

"Quite right," said I. "Let's drink it over."

"This is no time for drink," snapped the Armenian. "The night is dwindling—and how can I desist from killing him when, as I have told you, I cannot get into her room without awaking him? And it stands to reason that as soon as I see him I shall also see red, and kill—as I must, by reason of my vow and by order of the Dashnakists. As I have told you, I would have preferred to have got Anaïs out of the house first, but that seems impossible."

Tarlyon opened his mouth, and he closed it. I knew what was passing in Tarlyon's mind, and I thought I would let it pass, so that he might think again.

But then he reopened his mouth, and this is what he said, "My friend and I might perhaps consider giving you a little assistance, if in return you gave us a promise—"

"I promise nothing."

"Don't be silly," said Tarlyon. "What I wish to point out is that, if my friend and I help you to get your sister out of that house you must drop this killing business. We will contrive some way of keeping his Excellency quiet while you rescue your sister—but you must give your word of honor, or some efficient substitute, that you will not come back and murder the wretched pasha. Now, I want no back-chat about it—either you will or you will not."

"But I am bound to the Dashnakists!" cried the Armenian; rather regretfully, I thought.

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"Blast the Dashnakists," said Tarlyon. "Yes or no?"

"I promise," said the Armenian suddenly.

Reasonable noises issued from me.

"You seem to take it for granted that we just walk into the house. How do we get in?"

"This cuts windows like a knife," said the Armenian, showing us in the palm of his hand a glittering little thing like a toy dagger. "A German invention."

"The matter will be further facilitated," said Tarlyon, "by our first getting my car, which is opposite Claridge's, and driving in it to the front door. No policeman would dare suspect anything wrong in a house while a Rolls-Royce is standing outside it. Especially, Ralph, when you are sitting in it."

"I shall be in the house," I said firmly. Not that I wanted to be—but one says those things, and one always says them firmly.

"Perhaps that would be better," said the Armenian. "It will certainly take the two of you to keep Achmed Jzzit quiet while I break in the first locked door I see and get Anaïs. And a Rolls-Royce car is even more impressive empty than when someone is in it—people make it seem possible."

Thus and thus, we got the car and drove bravely to the house. We passed two policemen at the corner of Davies Street, but they were not interested in us. I must say burglary is easy when one has a large and rich car to do it from.

Like all Mayfair houses, this had a tradesmen's entrance; through a little gate, on the right of the few steps to the front door, down some steps, and into a little area where was the kitchen door and a window.

"Wait in the car," said the dark young man, and vanished down to the area. We heard a very faint scratching, one little wicked word, a little more scratching; and then the lights blazed up through the glass above the front door, and it was opened. The Armenian stood in the lighted doorway as though he owned the house. I admired him.

Tarlyon's first words when we were in the hall of the house were: "Give me your gun."

The Armenian surrendered his revolver without a word, but he sighed. Then he marshaled us.

"Very quiet," he whispered. "And very quick. We must try the upstairs rooms to see which is his bedroom. One touch on the door will awaken him, so you must muffle him at once, else he will awaken the servants. In the meanwhile I will find my sister; then I will take her straight out of the house and we will await you in your car—and I will blow your horn twice, gently, to show that I am awaiting you. It will be kind of you, then, to drive us to Mr. Ritz's hotel in Piccadilly, where, perhaps, with your

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influence, we may get my sister a lodging for the night. But, remember, keep a tight hold on Achmed Jzzit until I blow the horn—muffle him straightway and let him not open his mouth, else he will bring the neighbourhood down on us."

We began with a bit of luck—or so it seemed. Having tiptoed up to the first landing, the very first door we touched held the lightly sleeping pasha. We knew he was there by the howl that followed our touching the door knob—indeed he was a light sleeper, that man of bestial fancies!

But we gave him no time to make a real noise; we leaped into the room; I switched on the light, Tarlyon leaped on the bed and him, I leaped after Tarlyon, and in a second we held him making smothered, howling noises under the bedclothes.

We had not even had time to see if he was young or old, but the shape of him suggested a certain age. He was, however, an active and restless shape. We were very gentle with him, almost too gentle, for once a distinct howl issued from somewhere under the sheets.

"Steady," said George Tarlyon to the restless shape. "You'll throttle yourself," he added.

To prevent that, we, with a sudden and well-concerted movement, uncovered his head and muffled him with a handkerchief. We looked upon his face for the first time.

"You're a nasty, cruel old man," said George Tarlyon.

Achmed Jzzit Pasha looked all that the Armenian had said he was, and more. A fierce old face it was that looked at us. His eyes, under white, bushy eyebrows, were frantic and furious, and never for a second did he cease to struggle. I thought of that fine old Turkish warrior of the last century, the man of Plevna, Osman Pasha; this old man was of the same breed, I thought.

We had so far heard nothing of the Armenian; but that Achmed Jzzit Pasha realized that we two were only accessories was evident, for not even his struggling with us concealed the fact that he was listening, listening intently.

A slight noise, as of a drawer hastily banged, came from the next room. It was only a small noise, but it had a mighty effect on the old slayer of men. His eyes simply tore at us, his fat little body heaved frantically, he bit my finger in trying to howl—he went quite mad, that violent old Turk. But neither Tarlyon nor I am a small man, and we managed to hold him.

"He's an infernally long time about it," grumbled Tarlyon at last—and at that very moment the horn outside blew twice. We welcomed it.

"Now," said Tarlyon to the heaving old man, "we are about to release you. Your girl has flown, so it's too late for you to make a

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noise. So don't." And for form's sake he showed the revolver, though I never saw a man who looked less likely to use it. "You may not realize it," he added severely, "but we have saved your life. After the first shock has worn off, you will thank two disinterested men for having saved you from the wrath of an Armenian."

With another sudden and well-concerted movement we let go. The pasha did not make a noise. It was evident he realized that it was too late. But in the next few seconds he revealed, for a Turk, an astonishing knowledge of the English language. Then he leaped out of bed, a funny little creature in pink pajamas, and rushed out of the room. Breathless, we found him in the next room.

Now, I have very little acquaintance with girls' bedrooms, but a glance was sufficient to show me that no girl alive could have a bedroom like that. There was no bed in it, and very little else: just a thing like a tall-boy, but made of steel, or so it looked; and that had certainly been ravaged.

Then the old man really began to howl, and we hadn't the heart to stop him. He howled himself back to the bedroom, and we followed him, looking and feeling like all the things he said we were.

"But aren't you Achmed Jzzit Pasha?" I pleaded. But the life had suddenly gone out of him; he sat on the edge of the bed.

"My name is Wagstaffe," he said weakly, "and I have the finest collection of Roman coins in the country. Or rather I had. My son, Michael Wagstaffe, has them now—thanks to you two idiots!"

We had heard of Michael Wagstaffe—bankrupt twice, a well-known war correspondent, and a V. C. What can you do with a man like that?

Tarlyon had an idea, which took him to the window; I had the same idea, and followed him. We looked down upon the face of Brook Street, and behold!—it was empty. Never was a Rolls-Royce car with lamps alight so invisible.

We went back to Mr. Wagstaffe on the edge of the bed.

"We are sorry," I muttered, but he seemed not to hear us.

George Tarlyon is usually a fine, upstanding fellow, and some people have thought him handsome, but now he looked as though he had been trodden on all over.

Mr. Wagstaffe was whispering, almost to himself: "Two years ago, when I drove him out of the house, he swore that one day he would steal my coins. And now he has stolen my coins. I always knew he would keep his word, for he is a devil. And he always knew that, come what might, I would not prosecute my son for a thief. My Roman coins!" And Mr. Wagstaffe wept.

We explained our position to him. We gave him a brief outline of

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the facts. We begged him to understand. We pointed out that if his son really had been an Armenian and if he had really been Achmed Jzzit Pasha we had undoubtedly saved his life. I couldn't help thinking that he ought to be grateful to us, but I didn't say that.

He seemed to find a little solace in our discomfiture.

"Ah, he's a clever boy, Michael," sighed Mr. Wagstaffe. "He is always on the lookout for what he calls the mugs. I gather that you two gentlemen are mugs—the same, perhaps, as what are known in America as guys. But I, his father, can assure you that he is not an Armenian; nor has he ever been nearer to Armenia than the Bankruptcy Court, but he's been there twice.

"He calls himself the Cavalier of the Streets, but when he is up to any of his tricks he disguises himself as an Armenian—the disguise consisting merely of his saying he is an Armenian. It's so simple, he says, for the mugs believe him at once, on the ground that no one would say he was an Armenian if he wasn't.

"I have been back from America only a week, and he must have been searching all London for me. He probably saw me at the theater this evening, and was going to raid my house alone when you two intelligent gentlemen got in his way. But he is not a bad boy really—he's got ideas, that's what it is, and also mugs seem to have an irresistible fascination for him.

"Take your case, for instance. I have no doubt but that he will be ready to return my coins in exchange for a check—though, of course, that depends on the check. And I can see, gentlemen, that you are eager to show your regret for breaking into my house and assaulting my person by offering to pay the check yourselves. I thank you; though, indeed, it is the least you can do, and an infinitely more convenient way of settling the matter than wearisome arguments in a police court—provided, of course, that housebreaking and assault are matters for argument."

I giggled. I simply couldn't help it.

"That's all very well," said Tarlyon, "but what about my car?"

"What is the matter with your car?" asked Mr. Wagstaffe gently.

"There's so damn little the matter with it," snapped Tarlyon, "that it's probably halfway down the Dover Road by now."

"Ah," said Mr. Wagstaffe wearily, "I see. Cars have an irresistible fascination for Michael. I am sorry. Was it a good car?"

Tarlyon's answer left no room for doubt.

"Pity," said Mr. Wagstaffe. "A great pity. He may, of course, return it. He may. You cannot, of course, compel him to, for it would be difficult for you, in your position, to put the police on him. But he

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may return it on his own. Michael is not a bad boy really. He will, I am sure, communicate with me as to what I will offer for the return of my coins. I will then give him the check which you have so kindly promised to post to me tonight, and perhaps he will soften also as regards your car and return it to you.

"Naturally, he will expect your check to approximate—say, half the value of your car. Michael is something of an expert about the value of cars. That's why I said it was a pity, sir, a pity that your car was not a cheap car. But I am sure you will have no difficulty in finding a taxicab home. They are so abundant in Grosvenor Square that my sleep is often disturbed by them."

The rest of the story is not at all interesting. George Tarlyon's car was finally returned, and George Tarlyon is sorry that Mr. Michael Wagstaffe's nose is already broken.

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

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"Old Master" and "New Master" . . .

"The Ransom of Red Chief" is a famous American short story—the tale of the kidnaping of a ten-year-old boy (a "forty-pound chunk of freckled wildcat") as told by that "Old Master," the one and only O. Henry. And after you've read this American classic (or reread it—and it deserves rereading), we offer you another kidnaping story . . . but first renew and refresh yourself with the timeless humor, the enduring sharpness of observation, the unfailing glitter of artistry, the O'Henryesque irony that were as much the literary trademarks of William Sydney Porter as his "snappers" and surprise endings . . .

THE RANSOM OF RED CHIEF

by O. HENRY

IT LOOKED LIKE A GOOD THING: BUT wait till I tell you. We were down South, in Alabama—Bill Driscoll and myself—when this kidnaping idea struck us. It was, as Bill afterward expressed it, "during a moment of temporary mental apparition"; but we didn't find that out till later.

There was a town down there, as flat as a flannel-cake, and called Summit, of course. It contained inhabitants of as undeleterious and self-satisfied a class of peasantry as ever clustered around a Maypole.

Bill and me had a joint capital of about $600, and we needed just $2000 more to pull off a fraudulent town-lot scheme in Western Illinois with. We talked it over on the front steps of the hotel. Philoprogenitiveness, says we, is strong in semi-rural communities; therefore, and for other reasons, a kidnaping project ought to do better there than in the radius of newspapers that send reporters out in plain clothes to stir up talk about such things. We knew that Summit couldn't get after us with anything stronger than constables and, maybe, some lackadaisical bloodhounds and a diatribe or two in the *Weekly Farmers' Budget*. So, it looked good.

We selected for our victim the only child of a prominent citizen named Ebenezer Dorset. The father was respectable and tight, a mortgage fancier and a stern, upright collection-plate passer and forecloser. The kid was a boy of

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ten, with bas-relief freckles, and hair the color of the cover of the magazine you buy at the newsstand when you want to catch a train. Bill and me figured that Ebenezer would melt down for a ransom of $2000 to a cent. But wait till I tell you.

About two miles from Summit was a little mountain, covered with a dense cedar brake. On the rear elevation of this mountain was a cave. There we stored provisions.

One evening after sundown, we drove in a buggy past old Dorset's house. The kid was in the street, throwing rocks at a kitten on the opposite fence. "Hey, little boy!" says Bill, "would you like to have a bag of candy and a nice ride?"

The boy catches Bill neatly in the eye with a piece of brick.

"That will cost the old man an extra five hundred dollars," says Bill, climbing over the wheel.

That boy put up a fight like a welterweight cinnamon bear; but, at last, we got him in the bottom of the buggy and drove away. We took him up to the cave, and I hitched the horse in the cedar brake. After dark I drove the buggy to the little village, three miles away, where we'd hired it, and walked back to the mountain.

Bill was pasting court plaster over the scratches and bruises on his features. There was a fire burning behind the big rock at the entrance of the cave, and the boy was watching a pot of boiling coffee, with two buzzard tail-feathers stuck in his red hair.

He points a stick at me when I come up, and says, "Ha! cursed paleface, do you dare to enter the camp of Red Chief, the terror of the plains?"

"He's all right now," says Bill, rolling up his trousers and examining some bruises on his shins. "We're playing Indian. We're making Buffalo Bill's show look like magic-lantern views of Palestine in the Town Hall. I'm Old Hank, the Trapper, Red Chief's captive, and I'm to be scalped at daybreak. By Geronimo! that kid can kick hard."

Yes, sir, that boy seemed to be having the time of his life. The fun of camping out in a cave had made him forget that he was a captive himself. He immediately christened me Snake-eye, the Spy, and announced that, when his braves returned from the warpath, I was to be broiled at the stake at the rising of the sun.

Then we had supper; and he filled his mouth full of bacon and bread and gravy, and began to talk. He made a during-dinner speech something like this:

"I like this fine. I never camped out before; but I had a pet 'possum once. I hate to go to school. Rats ate up sixteen of Jimmy Talbot's aunt's speckled hen's eggs. Are there any real Indians in these woods? I want some more gravy. Does the trees moving make the wind blow? We

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had five puppies. What makes your nose so red, Hank? My father has lots of money. Are the stars hot? I whipped Ed Walker twice, Saturday. I don't like girls. You dassent catch toads unless with a string. Do oxen make any noise? Why are oranges round? Have you got beds to sleep on in this cave? Amos Murray has got six toes. A parrot can talk, but a monkey or a fish can't. How many does it take to make twelve?"

Every few minutes he would remember that he was a pesky redskin, and pick up his stick rifle and tiptoe to the mouth of the cave to rubber for the scouts of the hated paleface. Now and then he would let out a war whoop that made Old Hank the Trapper shiver. That boy had Bill terrorized from the start.

"Red Chief," says I to the kid, "would you like to go home?"

"Aw, what for?" says he. "I don't have any fun at home. I hate to go to school. I like to camp out. You won't take me back home again, Snake-eye, will you?"

"Not right away," says I. "We'll stay here in the cave a while."

"All right!" says he. "That'll be fine. I never had such fun in all my life."

We went to bed about eleven o'clock. We spread down some wide blankets and quilts and put Red Chief between us. We weren't afraid he'd run away. He kept us awake for three hours, jumping up and reaching for his rifle and screeching, "Hist! pard," in mine and Bill's ears, as the fancied crackle of a twig or the rustle of a leaf revealed to his young imagination the stealthy approach of the outlaw band. At last, I fell into a troubled sleep, and dreamed that I had been kidnaped and chained to a tree by a ferocious pirate with red hair.

Just at daybreak I was awakened by a series of awful screams from Bill. They weren't yells, or howls, or shouts, or whoops, or yawps, such as you'd expect from a manly set of vocal organs—they were simply indecent, terrifying, humiliating screams, such as women emit when they see ghosts or caterpillars. It's an awful thing to hear a strong, desperate, fat man scream incontinently in a cave at daybreak.

I jumped up to see what the matter was. Red Chief was sitting on Bill's chest, with one hand twined in Bill's hair. In the other he had the sharp case-knife we used for slicing bacon; and he was industriously and realistically trying to take Bill's scalp, according to the sentence that had been pronounced upon him the evening before.

I got the knife away from the kid and made him lie down again. But, from that moment, Bill's spirit was broken. He laid down on his side of the bed, but he never closed an eye again in sleep as long as that

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boy was with us. I dozed off for a while, but along toward sunup I remembered that Red Chief had said I was to be burned at the stake at the rising of the sun. I wasn't nervous or afraid; but I sat up and lit my pipe and leaned against a rock.

"What you getting up so soon for, Sam?" asked Bill.

"Me?" says I. "Oh, I got a kind of pain in my shoulder. I thought sitting up would rest it."

"You're a liar!" says Bill. "You're afraid. You was to be burned at sunrise, and you was afraid he'd do it. And he would, too, if he could find a match. Ain't it awful, Sam? Do you think anybody will pay out money to get a little imp like that back home?"

"Sure," said I. "A rowdy kid like that is just the kind that parents dote on. Now, you and the Chief get up and cook breakfast, while I go up on the top of this mountain and reconnoiter."

I went up on the peak of the little mountain and ran my eye over the contiguous vicinity. Over toward Summit I expected to see the sturdy yeomanry of the village armed with scythes and pitchforks beating the countryside for the dastardly kidnapers. But what I saw was a peaceful landscape dotted with one man ploughing with a dun mule. Nobody was dragging the creek; no couriers dashed hither and yon, bringing tidings of no news to the distracted parents. There was a sylvan attitude of somnolent sleepiness pervading that section of the external outward surface of Alabama that lay exposed to my view.

"Perhaps," says I to myself, "it has not yet been discovered that the wolves have borne away the tender lambkin from the fold. Heaven help the wolves!" says I, and I went down the mountain to breakfast.

When I got to the cave I found Bill backed up against the side of it, breathing hard, and the boy threatening to smash him with a rock half as big as a cocoanut.

"He put a red-hot boiled potato down my back," explained Bill, "and then mashed it with his foot; and I boxed his ears. Have you got a gun about you, Sam?"

I took the rock away from the boy and kind of patched up the argument. "I'll fix you," says the kid to Bill. "No man ever yet struck Red Chief but he got paid for it. You better beware!"

After breakfast the kid takes a piece of leather with strings wrapped around it out of his pocket and goes outside the cave unwinding it.

"What's he up to now?" says Bill, anxiously. "You don't think he'll run away, do you, Sam?"

"No fear of it," says I. "He don't seem to be much of a home body. But we've got to fix up some plan about the ransom. There don't seem to be much excitement around

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Summit on account of his disappearance; but maybe they haven't realized yet that he's gone. His folks may think he's spending the night with Aunt Jane or one of the neighbors. Anyhow, he'll be missed today. Tonight we must get a message to his father demanding two thousand dollars for his return."

Just then we heard a kind of war whoop, such as David might have emitted when he knocked out the champion Goliath. It was a sling that Red Chief had pulled out of his pocket, and he was whirling it around his head.

I dodged, and heard a heavy thud and a kind of a sigh from Bill, like a horse gives out when you take his saddle off. A rounded-off rock the size of an egg had caught Bill just behind his left ear. He loosened himself all over and fell in the fire across the frying pan of hot water for washing dishes. I dragged him out and poured cold water on his head.

By and by, Bill sits up and feels behind his ear and says, "Sam, do you know who my favorite Biblical character is?"

"Take it easy," says I. "You'll come to your senses presently."

"King Herod," says he. "You won't go away and leave me here alone, will you, Sam?"

I went out and caught that boy and shook him until his freckles rattled. "If you don't behave," says I, "I'll take you straight home. Now, are you going to be good, or not?"

"I was only funning," says he, sullenly. "I didn't mean to hurt Old Hank. But what did he hit me for? I'll behave, Snake-eye, if you won't send me home, and if you'll let me play the Black Scout today."

"I don't know the game," says I. "That's for you and Mr. Bill to decide. He's your playmate for the day. I'm going away for a while, on business. Now, you come in and make friends with him and say you are sorry for hurting him, or home you go, at once."

I made him and Bill shake hands, and then I took Bill aside and told him I was going to Poplar Cove, a little village three miles from the cave, and find out what I could about how the kidnaping had been regarded in Summit. Also, I thought it best to send a peremptory letter to old man Dorset that day, demanding the ransom and dictating how it should be paid.

"You know, Sam," says Bill, "I've stood by you without batting an eye in earthquakes, fire and flood—in poker games, dynamite outrages, police raids, train robberies, and cyclones. I never lost my nerve yet till we kidnaped that two-legged skyrocket of a kid. He's got me going. You won't leave me long with him, will you, Sam?"

"I'll be back some time this afternoon," says I. "You must keep the boy amused and quiet till I return.

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And now we'll write the letter to old Dorset."

Bill and I got paper and pencil and worked on the letter while Red Chief, with a blanket wrapped around him, strutted up and down, guarding the mouth of the cave. Bill begged me tearfully to make the ransom $1500 instead of $2,000. "I ain't attempting," says he, "to decry the celebrated moral aspect of parental affection, but we're dealing with humans, and it ain't human for anybody to give up two thousand dollars for that forty-pound chunk of freckled wildcat. I'm willing to take a chance at fifteen hundred dollars. You can charge the difference up to me."

So, to relieve Bill, I acceded, and we collaborated a letter that ran this way:

EBENEZER DORSET, ESQ.:

We have your boy concealed in a place far from Summit. It is useless for you or the most skillful detectives to attempt to find him. Absolutely, the only terms on which you can have him restored to you are these: We demand $1500 in large bills for his return; the money to be left at midnight tonight at the same spot and in the same box as your reply—as hereinafter described.

If you agree to these terms, send your answer in writing by a solitary messenger tonight at half-past eight o'clock. After crossing Owl Creek on the road to Poplar Grove, there are three large trees about 100 yards apart, close to the fence of the wheat field on the right-hand side. At the bottom of the fence post, opposite the third tree, will be found a small pasteboard box.

The messenger will place the answer in this box and return immediately to Summit.

If you attempt any treachery, or fail to comply with our demand as stated, you will never see your boy again.

If you pay the money as demanded, he will be returned to you safe and well within three hours. These terms are final, and if you do not accede to them no further communications will be attempted.

TWO DESPERATE MEN

I addressed this letter to Dorset, and put it in my pocket. As I was about to start, the kid comes up to me and says, "Aw, Snake-eye, you said I could play the Black Scout while you was gone."

"Play it, of course," says I. "Mr. Bill will play with you. What kind of a game is it?"

"I'm the Black Scout," says Red Chief, "and I have to ride to the stockade to warn the settlers that the Indians are coming. I'm tired of playing Indian myself. I want to be the Black Scout."

"All right," says I. "It sounds harmless to me. I guess Mr. Bill will help you foil the pesky savages."

"What am I to do?" asks Bill, looking at the kid suspiciously.

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"You are the hoss," says Black Scout. "Get down on your hands and knees. How can I ride to the stockade without a hoss?"

"You'd better keep him interested," said I, "till we get the scheme going. Loosen up."

Bill gets down on all fours, and a look comes in his eye like a rabbit's when you catch it in a trap.

"How far is it to the stockade, kid?" he asks, in a husky voice.

"Ninety miles," says the Black Scout. "And you have to hump yourself to get there on time. Whoa, now!"

The Black Scout jumps on Bill's back and digs his heels in his side.

"For heaven's sake," says Bill, "hurry back, Sam, as soon as you can. I wish we hadn't made the ransom more than a thousand. Say, you quit kicking me or I'll get up and warm you good."

I walked over to Poplar Cove and sat around the post office and store, talking with the chaw-bacons that came in to trade. One whiskerando says that he hears Summit is all upset on account of Elder Ebenezer Dorset's boy having been lost or stolen.

That was all I wanted to know. I bought some smoking tobacco, referred casually to the price of black-eyed peas, posted my letter surreptitiously, and came away. The postmaster said the mail carrier would come by in an hour to take the mail on to Summit.

When I got back to the cave Bill and the boy were not to be found. I explored the vicinity of the cave, and risked a yodel or two, but there was no response.

So I lighted my pipe and sat down on a mossy bank to await developments.

In about half an hour I heard the bushes rustle, and Bill wobbled out into the little glade in front of the cave. Behind him was the kid, stepping softly like a scout, with a broad grin on his face. Bill stopped, took off his hat, and wiped his face with a red handkerchief. The kid stopped about eight feet behind him.

"Sam," says Bill, "I suppose you'll think I'm a renegade, but I couldn't help it. I'm a grown person with masculine proclivities and habits of self-defense, but there is a time when all systems of egotism and predominance fail. The boy is gone. I sent him home. All is off. There was martyrs in old times," goes on Bill, "that suffered death rather than give up the particular graft they enjoyed. None of 'em ever was subjugated to such supernatural tortures as I have been. I tried to be faithful to our articles of depredation; but there came a limit."

"What's the trouble, Bill?" I asks him.

"I was rode," says Bill, "the ninety miles to the stockade, not barring an inch. Then, when the settlers was rescued, I was given oats. Sand ain't a palatable substitute. And

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then, for an hour, I had to try to explain to him why there was nothin' in holes, how a road can run both ways, and what makes the grass green. I tell you, Sam, a human can only stand so much. I takes him by the neck of his clothes and drags him down the mountain. On the way he kicks my legs black and blue from the knees down; and I've got to have two or three bites on my thumb and hand cauterized.

"But he's gone"— continues Bill — "gone home. I showed him the road to Summit and kicked him about eight feet nearer there at one kick. I'm sorry we lose the ransom; but it was either that or Bill Driscoll to the madhouse."

Bill is puffing and blowing, but there is a look of ineffable peace and growing content on his rose-pink features.

"Bill," says I, "there isn't any heart disease in your family, is there?"

"No," says Bill, "nothing chronic except malaria and accidents. Why?"

"Then you might turn around," says I, "and have a look behind you."

Bill turns and sees the boy, and loses his complexion and sits down plump on the ground and begins to pluck aimlessly at grass and little sticks. For an hour I was afraid of his mind. And then I told him that my scheme was to put the whole job through immediately and that we would get the ransom and be off with it by midnight if old Dorset fell in with our proposition. So Bill braced up enough to give the kid a weak sort of a smile and a promise to play the Russian in a Japanese war with him as soon as he felt a little better.

I had a scheme for collecting that ransom without danger of being caught by counterplots that ought to commend itself to professional kidnapers. The tree under which the answer was to be left—and the money later on—was close to the road fence with big, bare fields on all sides. If a gang of constables should be watching for anyone to come for the note they could see him a long way off crossing the fields or in the road. But no, sirree! At half-past eight I was up in that tree as well hidden as a tree toad, waiting for the messenger to arrive.

Exactly on time, a half-grown boy rides up the road on a bicycle, locates the pasteboard box at the foot of the fence post, slips a folded piece of paper into it, and pedals away, off again back toward Summit.

I waited an hour and then concluded the thing was square. I slid down the tree, got the note, slipped along the fence till I struck the woods, and was back at the cave in another half an hour. I opened the note, got near the lantern, and read it to Bill. It was written with a pen in a crabbed hand, and the sum and substance of it was this:

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TWO DESPERATE MEN:

Gentlemen: I received your letter today by post, in regard to the ransom you ask for the return of my son. I think you are a little high in your demands, and I hereby make you a counter-proposition, which I am inclined to believe you will accept. You bring Johnny home and pay me $250 in cash, and I agree to take him off your hands. You had better come at night, for the neighbors believe he is lost, and I couldn't be responsible for what they would do to anybody they saw bringing him back. Very respectfully,

EBENEZER DORSET

"Great pirates of Penzance," says I; "of all the impudent—"

But I glanced at Bill, and hesitated. He had the most appealing look in his eyes I ever saw on the face of a dumb or a talking brute.

"Sam," says he, "what's two hundred and fifty dollars, after all? We've got the money. One more night of this kid will send me to a bed in Bedlam. Besides being a thorough gentleman, I think Mr. Dorset is a spendthrift for making us such a liberal offer. You ain't going to let the chance go by, are you?"

"Tell you the truth, Bill," says I, "this little ewe lamb has somewhat got on my nerves too. We'll take him home, pay the ransom, and make our getaway."

We took him home that night. We got him to go by telling him that his father had bought a silver-mounted rifle and a pair of moccasins for him, and we were to hunt bears the next day.

It was just twelve o'clock when we knocked at Ebenezer's front door. Just at the moment when I should have been abstracting the $1500 from the box under the tree, according to the original proposition, Bill was counting out $250 into Dorset's hands.

When the kid found out we were going to leave him at home he started up a howl like a calliope and fastened himself as tight as a leech to Bill's leg. His father peeled him away gradually, like a porous plaster.

"How long can you hold him?" asks Bill.

"I'm not as strong as I used to be," says old Dorset, "but I think I can promise you ten minutes."

"Enough," says Bill. "In ten minutes I shall cross the Central, Southern, and Middle Western States, and be legging it trippingly for the Canadian border."

And, as dark as it was, and as fat as Bill was, and as good a runner as I am, he was a good mile and a half out of Summit before I could catch up with him.

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***a new novelet by* VICTOR CANNING**

And here is the other story—the tale of the kidnaping of a fifteen-year-old English boy (another "monster," with the "mental equipment and temperament of a fallen angel") as told by one of the "New Masters" of the crime-and-detective short story. The two tales—one old, one new, and one American, the other British—have basically the same plot idea . . . but what differences in style, in background, and most important, in the development of incident and denouement!

THE RANSOM OF ANGELO

by VICTOR CANNING

MILKY WAYE, THE SECRETARY of the Minerva Club, once figured out that if the combined prison sentences served by the members of the club were laid end to end, backwards, you'd finish up in the year 1066. As a "numbers man," Milky could do almost anything with figures and usually get away with it. His few failures, however, added seven years to the Minerva's record for total sentences.

The club itself, in a turning off Brook Street, had a highly respectable and discreet appearance, a uniformed porter at the desk (age sixty-five, with ten years of prison service), and a membership of about three hundred. The conditions of entry were that a member must be able to contribute two years or more to the trip back to the Battle of Hastings, and also be able to pay—or beg, borrow, or steal—£50 a year as dues.

Outside, the club members were free to carry on their adroit adaptations to the strains of modern civilization. Inside the club, there was nothing but good manners and the most honorable behavior. You could leave your wallet in your overcoat pocket in the cloakroom and find it there hours later. The place was an oasis of tranquillity after the stresses and strains of the work-a-day world. In the quiet of the smoking room, so conducive to speculative thought, some of the finest and most involved schemes for illegal profit had been worked out. It was here, for instance, that Flint Morrish had evolved the tactical plans which had made him the only ex-convict ever to own a prison. He still owned it—but that is another story, though it has something to do with this one.

In the smoking room Solly Badrubal had turned the loss of his

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wife's black poodle into the acquisition of a film company and the birth of a new child star, Angelo Downy. This story is about Angelo Downy and Solly Badrubal, but not about the poodle. There is a dog in this tale of the Minerva Club—a young Gordon setter puppy with a tail like a whipping hawser and a grin that flopped right down to its gawky knees.

The whole affair began with Milky Waye talking one day in the smoking room to Solly and Jim O'Leary who was just back from a trip to Devonshire and five years of brisk moorland air. Each was sitting behind a large whiskey. Milky was a tall, distinguished-looking man with white hair, a little waxed mustache, and the kindly twinkle of a family lawyer in his eye. Solly was very short, very plump, very bald, and with a sleek quick kind of movement that made you think of those little jobs that wriggle out of the cracks behind baths—silverfish, I think they are called. But he had a big heart of the brightest alloy right on his sleeve and a smile you couldn't see for cigar smoke.

Jim O'Leary was tall, dark, hard, and brooding, like a hell-threatening parson who liked his parsonage to be full of drafts and damp. He had no sense of humor at all. He'd thrown it away long ago as a hindrance.

Milky Waye said to Solly, "I see your new film is having its premiere next week."

"That is so," said Solly. "You should have two tickets. Five guineas each. It is a great story. The small boy torn between his divorced mother and father. He loves them both. It is full of heart. This mother, you see, is a strip-tease *artiste,* and we have a wonderful scene where she is doing her act and the father—he is a police inspector and he does not know she is doing this work to get more money for them to put down the deposit on a house—"

"Quite," said Milky. "It is disgusting how the police are underpaid. They would be better tempered, maybe, if they were decently paid."

"And this father," said Solly, "leads a raid on the place. And then—"

"It will make a lot of money?" asked Milky.

"It would make more," said Solly, "if I did not have to pay that curly-headed brat Angelo Downy so much. And what it does make will be milked by tax. I am a poor man through giving the public great pictures."

Milky nodded, and then after a pause said, "You know, despite the Finance Act of 1960, there is still a great body of legal opinion which holds that a subject is still entitled to arrange his financial affairs so that they do not attract taxation."

"As an accountant," said Solly, "you tell me a new angle. There ain't none I know of."

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Jim O'Leary stirred and reached for his whiskey. "There's always some new graft with Milky."

"Quite right," said Milky. "It would need three of us. Save you thirty thousand pounds. You cut me in for five, and Jim for five. I've been giving it a lot of thought."

Solly ordered three more whiskies and was silent until they came.

"Expound," he said, "I am a reasonable man, but I do not like being an overtaxed man."

Milky Waye said, "You have this Angelo Downy child who is a public figure."

"He is also a public menace."

"Never mind. You have a big picture about to be shown. So the boy is kidnaped and held for ransom—say, forty thousand pounds. Jimmy and I arrange that. You pay over the money and the rest is easy."

"I am not quite following you, Milky. So I pay over the money?"

Milky smiled. "We pay it back to you, but nobody knows this. So you are not out of pocket except for the ten thousand which we keep out of the forty. Now, you have had to pay forty thousand pounds to get Angelo Downy back. Safe and sound. He is a valuable asset to your company. The ransom money is a tax deductible expense. Forty thousand pounds on which you would have had to pay surtax means that you have saved yourself about twenty-six thousand pounds to begin with. And you also have thirty thousand back that no one knows about. So you have made yourself fifty-six thousand pounds tax free."

"It's complicated," said Jim.

"It's not strictly accurate," said Solly. "But it sounds interesting. Milky is dressing it up a little, but I do not mind that. Out of forty thousand pounds on which I would normally pay tax, I avoid tax altogether. I save, say, twenty-six thousand pounds. I pay you ten. I am left with a net saving of sixteen thousand pounds."

"It is another way of looking at it," said Milky equably.

"We will look at it that way," said Solly. "But sixteen thousand is sixteen thousand, and I am all for it. The only condition is that the boy is not hurt. I would personally like him hurt, but he is a business asset. Don't tell me nothing, but go ahead. And it is better done in the next few days for it will be wonderful publicity for the film. But he is an awkward brat, and sharp as a pair of shears. Also he is strictly dishonest and disrespectful as well as having a swollen head."

"I shall handle him," said Jim. "I am now against children since it was a small girl wandering down in the middle of the night for a drink of water who got me sent to the Moor this last time. She was curly-headed and wore pink pajamas with white rabbits on them and—" he held out his right hand

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—"this scar is where she bit me when I wanted her to stop shouting. I am against children."

So the kidnaping of Angelo Downy was arranged. And for a hundred pounds' share in the project Milky and Jim O'Leary brought in Horace Head—more as a chaperon, or companion-and-nursemaid, and also because they both trusted Horace. He was so dull-witted that half the time he did not understand what was going on and so could be a most confusing witness if he ever got into the box.

In fact, Horace's engaging smile, loosely framed by cauliflower ears, and his good-natured, oblique conversational style had driven more than one London magistrate to near-apoplexy. But he was fundamentally a good egg, and was famous for the fact that in his early days, when down on his luck as a fighter, he had swiped the whole of the fruit and vegetable exhibits of a Royal Horticultural Society Exhibition. But that too is another story . . .

Angelo Downy was fifteen, looked about twelve, and had the mental equipment and temperament of a fallen angel with no regrets for the past. He looked like a miniature Italian tenor, dark, curly-haired, plump, with sun-warm cheeks, sloe-black eyes, a flashing smile for the public and cameras, and a permanent scowl at other times.

At the end of a day's work or deviltry he liked to relax with a large gin and bitter lemon and a cigar. He was willful, wayward, and unpredictable, and with all the natural wit of a boy born just off the Old Kent Road who had been working with his father as a dog stealer at the age of five. If he had one passion in life, it was dogs. He was capable of love only for dogs.

At eight o'clock on the evening of the premiere of his film, *The Model Mother,* he was sitting alone in his room at the Leroy Hotel, dressed in a dinner jacket, enjoying his gin and bitter lemon and cigar, and feeding crackers to a loosely coordinated Gordon setter puppy of some eight months. The puppy which had a gold and diamond-studded collar around its neck was called, according to a gold medallion which hung from the collar, Prince Narrowmeath of Moortown. Angelo referred to him as Bugs which the puppy seemed to prefer. Already the two were in love.

Half an hour before, Angelo had stolen the dog from a room at the far end of the corridor. The door has been slightly ajar and Angelo had seen Bugs sitting on a settee. He had whistled gently and the dog had come to him. As simple as that—except that the whistle had been one of the secrets of his father's trade.

There was a knock on the door and Solly Badrubal entered. He

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gave Angelo a precise good evening, took his gin and tipped it into a vase, and stubbed out the cigar.

He said, "One of the press boys has to see you this way and your future is ruined. Mothers do not like little boys to do these things."

"My mother does not mind. And I am not little. I don't want to go to this premiere. I want to stay here with Bugs."

"This animal? We should ring for it to be taken away. We do not want any more dog trouble."

"He followed me. Can I help it? Besides he's going to the premiere with me and on the publicity tour. Otherwise . . ." He shrugged his plump shoulders.

Solly considered this for a moment. After the premiere Angelo was being driven to the station to get a sleeper north for the beginning of a personal appearance tour. His bags had already been taken down to the waiting Rolls Royce which was to take him first to the premiere, then to the railway station. Since Milky Waye was the chauffeur, and Jim O'Leary and Horace Head were sitting in the back right now, Angelo would never reach the premiere.

Solly decided that they were capable of coping with a dog as well as Angelo, so he said, "It is okay. Small boy with a dog—it is a good touch. But after the premiere he goes back to his owner."

"He stays with me."

"You will be pinched for stealing. Even from here I can see that collar he wears is worth a ton."

Angelo nodded. "Easily. And he's worth about two hundred. I know the Narrowmeath of Moortown strain. Two of them have been Cruft's Champions."

"Go clean your teeth and rinse your mouth out. We do not want you blowing gin and cigar at the Duchess of Malmerton when you are introduced. You forget that all the takings on this show are for the Children of Fallen Mothers?"

"What do I care?" said Angelo as he went obediently to the bathroom followed by Bugs.

"Or me," murmured Solly. And then he called through the open bathroom door. "You will travel alone in the Rolls. Make the big entrance. I will come behind. You can give five autographs. No more. And watch what you write. There have been complaints which I have had to pay the press boys to hush up. Some of the things you write are just not nice."

Five minutes later Angelo, leading Bugs, went through the foyer of the Leroy and out to the waiting Rolls Royce. The pavement was thick with fans and a tall, spinsterish-looking woman with wired-up spectacles thrust an autograph book into his hands. He gave her a wan, world-worn smile, his eyes misting with easily controlled tears, and wrote,

I am really a dwarf, aged 40, with a wife and three children.

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They keep me drugged and won't let me see my family. Ring my wife at Whitehall 03472 and tell her.

Angelo Downy

He got into the car, beaming. Whitehall 03472 was Solly Badrubal's number.

The smile went from his face as he found himself flanked in the back seat by Horace and Jim. As the car drove off, Angelo said scowling, "What the hell are you doing here? I'm supposed to be alone." Through the half-glass partition he shouted to the chauffeur, "Stop and kick these men out."

Milky turned and said to Jim O'Leary, "Smack his head and tell him to shut up."

Jim nodded, cuffed Angelo, and said, "A pleasure. Already I do not like him."

Horace giggled gently and patted Angelo's shoulder saying, "Don't mind Jim. He ain't got no kids of his own. That's a nice dog. Joints want kind of screwing up a bit, eh? Take up the play on the bearings."

"What is all this?" asked Angelo.

"Kidnaping," said Horace happily. "Gonna make a lot of money out of you. No rough stuff, though —like cutting off ears. You'll like it. You know summat? You look kind of smaller than you do in your films. I seen 'em all."

"Belt up!" said Angelo.

"That's right," said Jim. "Belt up, Horace."

Milky turned his head and said pleasantly, "You sit tight, Angelo. Any trouble from you and they'll push you under the seat and put a blanket over you."

Angelo said nothing as the car turned over Waterloo Bridge. He pulled out a cigar case and selected one, trimming the end with a gold clipper.

Horace watched him fascinated, and said admiringly, "Your old man would certainly be proud of you. Regular little gent you've become. Fancy—old Dog Downy's boy! Sad when he passed away. Still, cigars is bad, you know. For the wind. Got to keep fit." He banged his broad torso and the car echoed with a hollow sound.

"Muzzle him," said Angelo. And then to the back of Milky's head he said, "How much are you asking for me?"

Milky chuckled. "Forty thousand pounds. Satisfied?"

Angelo chuckled, too. "Solly will break a blood vessel. But it's good publicity. Where are we going?"

"Wait and see," said Jim, "and since you're smoking, what about handing 'em round."

Angelo hesitated for a moment and then with a shrug pulled out his case and selected two cigars which he handed to them. He watched them light up and settle back as the car purred luxuriously through the outer suburbs. Five minutes later the two cigars exploded in their faces.

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Angelo leaned forward, resting his hands on top of Bugs's head, and laughed until the tears came. Jim brushed his waistcoat free of burning shreds and leaned over and smacked Angelo's head hard.

"Practical joker, eh? Maybe I should cut your ears off."

Angelo, still laughing, said, "Better not. You wouldn't get forty thousand then."

Horace held up the shattered stub of his cigar, frowning, puzzled, and said quietly, "Funny, ain't never had one do that before. Something must have got in the tobacco."

"Belt up," said Jim angrily. "If this little bleeder—"

"Quiet back there," called Milky.

Horace lay back beaming and said, "Know something? First time I been in a Rolls Royce. Nothing to it, is there? I could take this for days."

After about half an hour, when they were in the country, Angelo said suddenly, "I've been thinking. You could make it fifty thousand and cut me in for ten. Solly need never know. And for ten I'd cooperate."

From the front of the car Milky, without turning, said firmly, "For nothing you will cooperate."

Angelo just shrugged, and after a while he hauled Bugs up onto his lap and they both went to sleep.

Horace looked over them to Jim and said happily, "Nice sight, ain't it. Boy and his dog. All kids like dogs, you know. Kids got to have pets."

"If he should have a pet," said Jim, "it ought to be a snake. Cut him in for ten thousand! Where does he get these ideas?"

Ignoring him Horace went on, "Got to have a pet of some kind. Remember Flint Morrish and me, we had a couple of mice when we was in Parkstone. Very healthy, Parkstone, with all that sea air. They had a family. Not a hair on 'em. Pink as babies' bottoms. Wonder what happened to old Flint?"

"You'll see him tonight," said Jim. "That's where we're going."

There is a small town in Hampshire, a little port of about five thousand people called Brankfold. At one time the town had a small jail attached to the old stone house of the Chief Constable. But after a time the jail became so little used that it was decided to close it down and to sell the building.

Flint Morrish, for reasons that don't belong to this story, bought it, and got stuck with it. But being a resourceful man with a wry sense of humor, he decided to convert it into a private hotel and take in carefully selected guests. Most of them were members of the Minerva Club who wanted to get quietly away into the country for a while, and most of them appreciated the irony of living in a comfortably converted jail.

The outside of the building had

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been left as it was—iron-studded doors, barred windows to all the cells, and a surrounding wall with a formidable *chevaux de frise*. If you don't know what that is, it doesn't matter—but never try to climb over one in the dark. In the former exercise yard Flint had made a nice little garden, with a lily pool and goldfish, and had settled down to living happily ever after. He had a wooden leg—the result of something going wrong with the gelignite in an early safe job—a beaming country-squire kind of face, a passion for loud tweeds, and the greenest fingers in the county. He loved flowers and they grew for him.

There were eight cells in the ex-jail and these had been doubled up to make four good-sized rooms. There were four other rooms in the house, and it was as private and secluded a place to keep Angelo Downy as Milky Waye could think of. There wasn't a ghost of a chance that he could break out so long as the main door was kept locked. And he wasn't going to be there long enough to finish a tunneling job.

Angelo was installed with Bugs in one of the cells. It was a nice room with a pale-blue carpet, chintz at the barred windows, a fourposter bed, and a washing place behind a curtain.

For the first day of his kidnapping, Angelo was reasonably well-behaved. He spent most of the morning reading the newspapers which carried headline stories of his kidnaping and his career, then took Bugs for a walk around the small garden with Horace in attendance, and then lunched in his room.

Flint Morrish, having lunch with Milky and Jim, said, "Strikes me as a nice lad. Modest, no trouble."

Jim O'Leary said, "You wait."

That evening Angelo demanded a gin and bitter lemon to go with his cigar. Flint, old-fashioned about the training of children, refused him this. Ten minutes later Horace, sitting on guard outside Angelo's room, shouted, "Fire!"

They all rushed up to find that Angelo had set fire to the hangings of his bed and was sitting in a chair by the window, calmly smoking his cigar and watching his temporary home burn.

Flint was furious at the damage to his best hangings, but Angelo got his drink. He also, when his dinner was brought up, refused to eat it. Lamb chops and green peas didn't appeal to him. He wanted an omelette of which he was especially fond—a cheese omelette laced with potted shrimps and shredded pimento.

Flint, a home-loving man, was also a good cook and—anxious to preserve his property from further damage—finally allowed Angelo to come down to the kitchen and make the omelette. Angelo, whose mother was Italian, was a good

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cook. Flint and the others stood by while Angelo demonstrated his skill. The omelette completed, Angelo dined at the kitchen table and gave Flint some of the omelette to taste.

Flint rolled his eyes. "Delicious," he said.

"You like it?" Angelo's eyes beamed at Flint's appreciation. "If you wish I'll make some more for you all."

He made four omelettes for them, but at their first mouthfuls Flint and Jim jumped to their feet, roaring with fury, and grabbing for glasses of water. They turned on Angelo with murder in their eyes. He had, surreptitiously, emptied a full can of mustard powder into the omelettes. Milky, who had cautiously delayed touching his omelette, got between Angelo and the two men.

"No violence. Remember. He's good money unmarked. But mark him and he'd be left on the shelf in a clearance sale. You ought to have known better than trust him."

At which point Horace, still eating at table, looked up and said, "What's all the fuss? Best omelette I ever had. Minds me of a curry my old lady used to make. Put a thirst on you for a week. Nothing wrong with a thirst if you've got the money to—"

"Belt up!" roared Jim.

"Take him up to his room," said Flint quietly. "Take him up to his room." The color had gone from his ruddy squire's cheeks and he was rapping the end of his wooden leg against the floor in an angry tattoo. . . .

The kidnaping arrangement was that in four days' time Solly Badrubal would send one of his clerks with the ransom money to Southampton where Flint would meet the man in a café. At first, Solly had only wanted to send the £10,000 due to Milky and Jim—out of which they would pay Horace £100, and Flint £500 for the use of his house.

But Milky had pointed out that since Solly's clerk would be an honest man he would spot that there was only £10,000. All the papers had blazoned the sum of £40,000, and the risk of the discrepancy leaking out could be dangerous. Reluctantly, Solly had agreed to send the full amount.

But before the four days had passed, all the men—and especially Flint—had had some very bad moments with the ingenious-minded Angelo. The boy was allowed the freedom of the garden, and to pass the time he took to training Bugs to fetch and carry things. He'd walk the setter around teaching it to carry a bag or newspaper, make it fetch a ball, come back, sit, and drop the ball at the command of word or whistle. Naturally, both boy and dog got bored at times with lessons, and then they would get the wind up their tails and go romping all over the place.

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Flint's flowers suffered. Bugs dug holes in the lawn and rockery, and quite a few of the garden dwarfs had their heads knocked off. The survivors had black mustaches penciled on them.

Apart from all this Angelo was an incorrigible practical joker. In one of the suitcases which had come with him he had enough booby traps and tricks to stock a "magic" store. All four of the men suffered. The details of their suffering are unimportant—they suffered. But the refrain—from Angelo—which went with it left them cold. He would cooperate if they cut him in on a share of the ransom.

They were prepared to suffer almost anything rather than cut him in. Even Horace, who took a long time to notice things, began to feel that there was something odd about the house. Every time he put his hand on the doorknob to go into Angelo's room he got an electric shock. He complained to Flint about faulty wiring and got a short answer.

Before two days had passed Flint was shattered by the state of his house and beloved garden, and appalled at the thought that he was only going to get £500. On the second night, after some thought, he telephoned a friend of his who was a sea captain working a small cargo ship out of Southampton. From then on, Flint faced Angelo's demolition work with a certain amount of resignation . . .

Two days later, when Flint returned from his rendezvous in Southampton, he informed the others that the messenger with the money hadn't turned up. Milky Waye telephoned Solly Badrubal and was indignantly told that Solly had sent off the money, even seen the man on the train. Solly, panicking, wanted to know what was going on down there. Milky Waye, suffering from a cold from opening a door and having a bucket of water fall on him, sneezed violently into the phone, and telling Solly to keep his hair, on, added grimly that he'd have to look into things.

Back in the kitchen he questioned Flint about the messenger.

"Flint, you aren't pulling a fast one, are you?"

"Not me," said Flint. "But that messenger is. I'll take a hundred to one on it. He comes down with the money and gets the first boat out of Southampton. Never see him again. It's what we'd all think of, isn't it?"

"It is," said Jim. "But this guy was from Solly's office. A little clerk chap. He wouldn't have that kind of mind."

"Maybe it developed on the train, hugging all that loot," said Flint evenly. "He's on his way to South America now. Never see him again."

Which was true, of course, for Flint had arranged it with his captain friend at the price of a couple of hundred quid. But the clerk did-

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n't have the money. Flint had it. The clerk, unadventurous, had always wanted to travel. Now he was traveling, shanghaied.

The ransom money was now in Flint's safe. It was a fair return, he thought, for all the trouble and damage caused by Angelo.

"What about Angelo?" asked Horace, who was peeling potatoes for the evening meal.

"Send him back to Solly," snapped Jim. "This whole thing is sour."

"What about Solly?" asked Milky Waye. "He could make trouble."

"He should pick more trustworthy servants," said Flint. "We'll take the boy off in the car about midnight and drop him somewhere on the road to London. After that we'd all better take a holiday for a while—till Solly cools down."

"I was beginning to like it here," said Horace. "Minds me of old times. Except there aren't any trusties around, and there's something wrong with the wiring of the place. You know, Flint, you ought to get an electrician in and—"

"Shut up," said Jim. "Why don't we cut the boy's throat and bury him in the rockery. Be a kindness to the world."

"The dog would dig him up and carry him home," said Milky. "Where's the whiskey? We've got to think."

Flint produced a large decanter of whiskey from the kitchen cupboard and they started to think.

When Angelo came down about an hour later to see what was happening about his supper, he found that they had done all their thinking and had passed out. The four of them were slumped unconscious around the kitchen table.

Angelo, whistling happily, made himself an omelette, pushed Jim O'Leary off his chair to the floor, and sat down to eat a leisurely meal. He was in no hurry. The knockout drops, which he always carried in his suitcase and which he had dropped into the whiskey, were made from a special recipe of his father's. They would fix an elephant for an hour, a race horse for three hours, and any two-legged creature for a good six. Angelo had used one once on a boy film star from Hollywood who was scheduled to do a turn with him in a Royal Command performance. The boy had been out for two days and Angelo had given the show of his life.

When he had finished his supper, Angelo took Bugs into the garden and knocked off the heads of the remaining dwarfs. Then he came back and went through the pockets of the four men, taking their watches and wallets. In Flint's pocket he found a letter from the captain of the cargo ship, which had sailed that day from Southampton.

The letter interested Angelo very much. He took Flint's keys, went up to Flint's bedroom, and found

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his safe behind a water color titled *A Distant View of Dartmoor*. Inside the safe was a brief case containing £39,800 in notes, and a brief scrawl from Solly which read, *What a wonderful scheme. Hope this will make all the boys happy.*

Angelo took the brief case, went back to the kitchen, and allowed himself an extra cigar and another gin and bitter lemon while he thought things over. All he had to do now—and he took his luck quite calmly—was to let himself out of the house with Flint's key and get back to London. He would hand the money over to his mother to bank for him. Then he could turn up at his hotel and say that three men, unknown to him, had dropped him on Waterloo Bridge.

There was nothing anyone would ever be able to do about it. The only thing he had to be careful about was to get to his mother without being recognized. He didn't want any copper picking him up with the brief case in his hand and hogging the glory for finding the kidnaped star and also poking his nose into the case and finding the money.

He decided to wait until midnight and then make for a main road, find an all night café, and smuggle himself in the back of a London-bound truck. Trains were out—conductors were as nosey and glory-seeking as coppers.

Actually, it was a little after midnight when he left. At the last moment his sense of humor got the better of him. He spent a happy half-hour fixing false mustaches on the snoring four. And he painted Jim's nose red with garden paint. He also tied everyone's shoelaces together and reached inside their jackets and cut their suspenders or belts. For a while he had contemplated pouring treacle over their hair, but finally decided against it. Jim O'Leary, for one, could easily be pushed over the line into violence, and Angelo didn't want his future marred by some act of berserk brutality in a dark alley.

So, just after midnight, Angelo, with Bugs at his heels, was on his way out of Brankfold and following a road which had been signposted Southampton 20 miles. Once he hit a main road it wouldn't be long before he found an all-night café. He took his time. The night was fine. He didn't mind how long it was before he reached London. When he got tired of carrying the brief case he handed it to Bugs who trotted along by his side carrying it proudly like any young dog which has learned a new trick.

The four men in the kitchen came back to life within a few minutes of each other. There was a great deal of groaning and stretching and muzzy shaking of heads.

Flint struggled to his feet, took a step forward, and fell flat on his face. Jim O'Leary followed him,

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repeated the act, and then, cursing, stood up and had his trousers concertina around his ankles. He let out a bellow of rage which brought Horace to life.

Horace stared blearily at Jim and then said, puzzled, "I didn't know you had a mustache, Jim. Been hitting the bottle, too, nose like a beacon—" He broke off as he tripped over his tied laces and crashed to the ground.

"That boy!" A great wail of anger came from Jim as he turned and caught sight of himself in the kitchen mirror on a cupboard door.

Then—

"My wallet!" cried Milky.

"My watch!" roared Jim.

"Something wrong with my braces," said Horace.

"My flamin' keys"—this from Flint.

Then, as they sorted themselves out, a bellow of apprehension issued from Flint. Holding up his trousers, he stumped rapidly out of the room. While he was gone, Milky, the practical one, fished a length of clothesline from a cupboard and they fashioned belts for their trousers.

After a time Flint came back. He stood in the doorway and surveyed the company with a grim look on his rubicund face, and the sound of high-pressure seething escaped from between his lips—like a boiler about to blow.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "this is serious. The boy is gone."

"Thank God," sighed Jim.

"He's gone and he's taken forty thousand nicker of ransom money with him," said Flint. And then, as they looked amazed at him, he went on, "I know. Explanations are due."

"I'll say," said Milky. "You had the money all the time."

"I did. I was going to do a fair split with you all when the boy went back. That way Solly would think he'd lost all his money and we'd have racked up ten thousand each. It was practical common sense."

"Except," said Jim threateningly, "you'd never have told us if this hadn't happened. I ought to do you."

"But I thought the clerk chap had got the money," said Horace. "What about him?"

"Shut up," said Milky. "He's on his way to South America if I know Flint."

"Africa actually," said Flint. "But that's not the point. Angelo's flown with the money. We've got to get him."

Milky eased off his false mustache gingerly and said, "Let me think. He won't go to the police—not with all that money on him. He'll want to get it safely tucked away. His mother—that's it. She holds the moneybags for him. He'll want to get to her first before anyone picks him up. Which means?"

"What would you do?" asked Flint.

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"What would we all do," said Jim. "It's obvious. He's on the road. Going to stow away on a lorry."

Horace said, "I still can't understand. I never passed out before."

They ignored him.

Ten minutes later they were all in Flint's car heading away from Brankfold on the only road which Angelo could have taken from the town. It was summer and already the sky was beginning to lighten. In another hour it would be full daylight.

Fortunately for them—or so it seemed—Angelo's progress had not been rapid. After a few miles he had developed a blister on his heel and was reduced to a slow hobble. Bugs now carried the brief case permanently and was getting tired of his duties.

They caught up with him after about half an hour on a long open stretch of road in open country. As the car pulled up alongside of him Angelo recognized them. He gave a whistle to Bugs to follow and slipped through the hedge. Forgetting his blister now, he put on a burst of speed which would have made his dog-thief father proud.

Flint said to Horace at the wheel of the car, "The road bends back at right angles a couple of miles up. You go on to the bend and wait for us. We'll follow him."

The three of them crashed through the hedge and were after Angelo in full cry. Horace, completely out of his depth, shook his head and drove on. Things were going too fast for him altogether.

Meanwhile, Angelo and Bugs were streaking across the fields with the others in pursuit. It was a lovely morning for a hunt. Jim O'Leary led, going like the wind and with murder in his heart. Milky Waye followed him closely, wondering if he wasn't losing his financial grip, since he hadn't even thought of the double-cross which Flint had so nearly pulled off. And behind came Flint, stumping away on his wooden leg, and cursing.

Angelo kept up his speed for about five minutes and then began to slacken. Ahead of him he saw a range of farm buildings rise over the hedges. He found a field path and a few seconds later was in the farmyard. Knowing he could no longer rely on speed to save himself, he darted for a long low building, hoping to hide there while his pursuers went by.

With Bugs at his heels, Angelo raced to one of the buildings, jerked open the door, and leaped in. Immediately there was an explosion of white feathers and three hundred laying hens, disturbed at their breakfast, hit the ceiling and let out a cacophony of cackles which could be heard a mile away.

Angelo realized that his pursuers must have heard the noise, so he dashed through the building toward a door at the far end, knowing that he must look for a new hiding place. But the door was

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locked and bolted. Turning to go back to the other door, he saw Jim O'Leary come bursting in.

Angelo, plowing his way through hens that would be egg-bound for a month from the shock, headed for a window on the far side of the house, pushed it open, and was through like a shot. Bugs followed him with a leap that was considerably hampered by the brief case he was still carrying. Angelo turned and slammed the window down on Jim's fingers as Jim grabbed at the sill.

Jim reeled back, letting out a scream of anguish that set the hens off again, and collapsed into a drinking trough. The next moment Milky Waye and Flint came charging into the building which now resembled a film set of a blizzard in an ascent of Mt. Everest.

Jim leaped up, shouting, "Back to the door! Don't let the little bleeder get away!"

But as they turned to the door, they found it blocked by a man in breeches, tall and burly, angry-faced, a little egg around his lips from having been disturbed at breakfast, and holding a double-barreled shotgun.

"A fine do, eh?" he roared. "The last time you come at night and pinch two dozen of my best hens. Now it's brazen-faced, daylight robbery. Ernie!" He shouted over his shoulder. "Get on the phone to the police—I'll hold 'em here!"

And he could, and he did. A twelve-bore shotgun was not to be treated lightly. The three—Flint, Jim, and Milky—stood panting, watching him, and slowly the hen house subsided to a quiet clucking and a few of the more phlegmatic hens made for their nest boxes to get on with the business of laying eggs that would, thanks to efficient marketing methods, be in the shops in four weeks' time marked *New Laid* . . .

Half a mile away Angelo saw a line of telegraph poles which marked a road. He headed for them, climbed a fence, and found himself in a large garden with a gravel path leading up to the doorway of a low red-tiled house.

As he approached, the door began to swing open. Knowing that he mustn't be recognized now that he had shaken off his pursuers, and aware that even in these bucolic depths his face was familiar, he jumped aside into a shrubbery and began to make a detoured.

He didn't notice for a moment that Bugs was not following him. Bugs, bemused by recent events and tired out from carrying the brief case, headed straight on, up the path, and into the porch of the doorway. Here he was confronted by a portly, benign-faced gentleman with a clerical collar who looked down at him and said, "Well, bless my soul! A dog."

At this moment a hundred yards away Angelo discovered that Bugs was no longer with him. And it

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was at this moment that Angelo made his mistake. He gave a whistle for Bugs, low and piercing. But it was the wrong whistle out of the wide repertoire taught him by his father. It shrilled through the morning, *Drop everything and come at once.*

Bugs did just that. He dropped the brief case at the old gentleman's feet, and with a bark of relief was away and after Angelo.

Five minutes later Angelo hit the main road only to find Horace waiting for him in the car. But Horace was a different cup of tea from the others.

Angelo climbed into the seat alongside him and said, "It's all right, Horace. Just drive me to London."

"London?"

"That's right. It's been arranged with the others." Angelo leaned back and opened the rear door for Bugs to jump in.

"It don't seem right," said Horace.

"That's what they said," said Angelo. "Just drive me to London."

Horace shrugged. He'd never been the mastermind in any job, just a muscle man. He was used to doing as he was told. So he started to drive Angelo to London and after a few miles Angelo discovered that Bugs no longer had the brief case. He was pretty upset about this, but he kept it to himself, imagining that Bugs had dropped it in the chicken house. Anyway, he consoled himself, he had enough on Solly over this phony kidnaping to blackmail him into a handsome payment for keeping his tiny mouth shut.

Somewhere in the suburbs of London, nearing lunchtime, Angelo and Bugs began to get hungry. Angelo made Horace stop the car outside a café, and leaving Bugs with Horace, Angelo went in to buy some biscuits and sandwiches. As he came to the door to return to the car, he saw that a motorcycle policeman had drawn up alongside Horace and Bugs. An interesting conversation was going on, if a little one-sided.

"Nice to see you, Horace," said the policeman. "Thought you was still inside."

"No, I ain't."

"Nice dog you got there. Nice collar too—gold with diamonds stuck in it. Up to your old tricks, eh?"

"What do you mean?"

"As though you don't know. This here is Prince Narrowmeath of Moortown."

"You're off your rocker," said Horace. "It's a dog, not a prince."

"Don't get funny with me, Horace. I can see it's a dog. And it was lifted from the Leroy Hotel. Brazen, you are. Now then, just you follow me down the road to the station and we'll sort it out. Dog snatching, eh? A bit out of your line, isn't it? Still . . ."

At this point Angelo withdrew

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into the café and made for the back door . . .

Well, there it is. Crime doesn't pay when a lot of rogues try to do one another down. A kind of rough justice operates. If you really want to make it pay you must go after law-abiding types who aren't used to jungle warfare.

Solly Badrubal lost forty thousand quid, plus another five he had to pay to Angelo to keep his mouth shut. He went out of films for four years and Angelo got a bigger contract with another company.

Horace got four months, and the other three, although their sentences weren't long, had a bad time in the Minerva Club when they came out for being such mugs as to be caught hen-lifting!

The only person who was really happy was the vicar at whose feet Bugs had dropped the brief case. He took it back into the breakfast room, opened it up, helped himself to a cup of coffee, and then with a great beam on his face turned to his wife and said, "You know, my dear, it is a wonderful world. A world of miracles. Here I have been for years and years trying to raise money for my Church Youth Camps and suddenly all I want is dropped on my doorstep by a dog."

"A dog, my dear?"

"An exceptional dog, of course, my love. Owned obviously by someone of great wealth. It had a gold collar with some kind of precious stones decorating it. The dog dropped the money at my feet and then, distantly, I heard its owner whistle, and away it went. So romantic, so generous! And obviously he wished to remain anonymous. But with the money was a note which made his intention clear. Listen to it. *What a wonderful scheme. Hope this will make all the boys happy.* Oh, it will, it will. Bless him!"

EDITORS' NOTE: *We are hoping to persuade Victor Canning to make "The Ransom of Angelo" the first in a series of stories about the Minerva Club; in fact, we'd like nothing better than having two new series from Mr. Canning—a continuation of the Department of Patterns series and more stories about the shifty members of the Minerva . . . perhaps Mr. Canning will tell us how Flint Morrish bought (of all things!) an old jail and "got stuck with it"—it should be a fascinating yarn!*

POSTSCRIPT: *Mr. Canning has done it! He has written the story of Flint Morrish's purchase of an old jail—and you will read it next month, in the August 1963 issue, on sale July 1.*

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a new story by

EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **WILLIAM O'FARRELL**

TITLE: ***A Paper for Mr. Wurley***

TYPE: Crime and Detection

LOCALE: Santa Monica, California

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *A fascinating story: how George Bostwick, high school senior, discovered the terrible dangers that lurk in our everyday lives . . . If you were George's English teacher, what mark would you give him?*

MY NAME IS GEORGE BOSTWICK and next June I'm going to graduate from Santa Monica High School. Maybe. The reason I'm only maybe going to graduate is Mr. Wurley. He teaches English IV and he's a—you know, perfectionist?

He gave the class this practically impossible assignment that has to be handed in today. The assignment is that we have to write a paper on any subject that we're interested in, and I sat up most of last night thinking about subjects I was interested in, and they were and still are football, cars, detective stories, and girls, not necessarily in that order.

But I have a feeling that Mr. Wurley would think that I should not be interested in these things to the exclusion of, say, Percy Bysshe Shelley or Lord Byron, and when I fell asleep I was still waiting for the inspiration that had not yet come.

"Just write it in your own words," he said, "as though you were talking to a friend."

Okay, friend:

So, on account of having stayed up most of last night, I slept late this morning and missed the school bus. My Mom and Dad are back east visiting, so I'm staying with my cousin Freddie who has a little house up Malibu Canyon. But right now Freddie is off on this fishing trip and he didn't wake me up. It was nine o'clock when I got down to the Pacific Coast Highway and

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started thumbing rides and worrying about the paper that I hadn't written and about what would happen to me when I didn't hand it in.

Pretty soon this lady came along in an Austin-Healey Sprite. She stopped and I saw that she was a nice-looking blonde lady but kind of old. She wore a wedding ring and must have been around thirty.

"You got a driver's license?"

"Sure," I said.

"Okay," she said, and started climbing out. "We're headed the same way, so you can drive me home." She got her knees jammed up against the steering wheel and had a hard time breaking free. "Like trying to get out of a sitz bath," she said.

Well, a Sprite's a sports car, and a little one at that, and it's not too easy for people of a certain age to get in and out of one, but that wasn't why she was finding it so tough. When she finally made it and walked around to climb into the other seat I saw what her trouble was. She was stoned. But stoned!

They got a thing in California called "Drunk in Auto." You can go to jail for it. Well, it was just last week that Freddie gave me the loan of his car to take the driving tests. My license being new and all, I wasn't sure I wanted to drive her anywhere.

"Maybe you'd like me to go over to the Mayfair Market and call a cab," I said.

"Young man," she said, "you leave me sitting on the highway, I'll have your Good Samaritan card picked up. You won't even be a Bad Samaritan. You'll be a Lousy Philistine. I live just this side the Sea Lion. Hop in the car and drive."

So I did what she told me to. And I'll say this for her—that was a real sweet car she owned. A stick job with four forward shifts, a tachometer, a windshield washer—the works. She wasn't any trouble, either. By the time we passed Malibu Pier she was asleep.

I looked in the side pocket and found her registration. Her name was Phyllis Bennett and she lived near the Sea Lion Café, like she'd said. A lot of picture people, actors and what-all live around there. I parked outside the gate in this thick wall and woke her up.

"You're home, Mrs. Bennett," I said. "Thanks for the lift."

For a minute she looked as though she was wondering who I was and how I'd come into her life. Then she smiled. "Hello, kid. Give me a hand."

I helped her out and through the gate and into a patio. Man, when I got inside was I surprised! It was real cool. Not fancy, you understand, but nice. You could hear the sound of waves down on the beach. There was a garden with flowers in it and a big white table with chairs around it and a red-and-white umbrella over it, and down at the other end of the patio there was a little

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swimming pool shaped like a kidney bean.

The house was nice, too. No tricked-up gingerbread—just a comfortable place to live. The beach stairs were on the right and there were three steps just ahead that led up to the door. Mrs. Bennett started for the door but, passing the table, she gave this sort of sigh and suddenly sat down.

"Got to rest a minute. Who are you, anyway?" she asked.

Well, I'm not what you might call gabby and I don't much like talking about myself, but I answered her the best I could. I told her my name and where I lived and how I was first-string tackle on the team at Samohi. She listened politely but she couldn't have been paying much attention because, while I was giving her a play-by-play rundown on last Saturday's game, she got up in the middle of the second quarter.

"Think I can make it now," she said.

I helped her up the steps. The door was open. She was starting to sag again when we went into the living room.

"Max! Hey, Max!" she called. Then she said, "Oh, I forgot. He's in Las Vegas with his red-headed so-called secretary. I'm talking about my husband, Max."

She went over to a sort of cabinet near the picture window and looked inside. "Well, what do you know!" she said. "Max went off and left me high and dry. Do me a little favor, George?"

"Well, I'd like to," I said, "but I'm already a half hour late for school. Would it take long?"

"Ten minutes, give or take a little, and I'll make it worth your while." She opened her handbag and handed me a bill. "Run up to the Mayfair for me and you can drive my car to school. Bring it back this afternoon."

I saw myself pulling up at Samohi in my little old Austin-Healy Sprite. "What should I get for you at the Mayfair, Mrs. Bennett?" I said.

"A fifth of scotch."

"What kind? Hey—this is a hundred-dollar bill!" I said.

"They can change it. Get any kind—grab the first bottle you see and make it fast," she said.

She sat down on a couch and I went out to the Sprite. A girl was sitting in it. She was pretty. In fact, she was the most beautiful girl I'd ever seen. I knew who she was, too. What's more, she acted like she knew me.

"Hi, George. How's about a lift to Santa Monica? Would you be kind enough?" she said.

Would *I* be kind enough! When Dorothy Dupree, star of screen and TV, asks for a lift she's the one that's being kind! "I'd be glad to, Miss Dupree," I said, "but I got to drive up to the Mayfair first. How come you know my name?"

"I've seen you playing football,

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George. I watch you every time I get the chance, which is every time my drama coach will let me. I think you're wonderful. Call me Dorothy," she said.

"Okay, Dorothy." I vaulted happily into the driver's seat. "Want to run up to the Mayfair with me?"

"I can't," she said. "That's where my drama coach has gone. She'd see me and I'd never get to Santa Monica today. I live next door"—she pointed to another gate—"and when I saw you bringing Phyllis Bennett home I thought, this is my chance!"

"To do what?"

"To get off on my own a little while," she said. "To skip going to the studio just for once. No lines to study. No interviews. No dancing lessons. Is that too much to ask?"

I thought about it and decided that it wasn't. "Everybody ought to have some time off once in a while," I said. "When is this party you mentioned coming back?"

"Any minute now."

"And she'll make you do these things that you don't want to do?"

"That's her job and she's an expert at it," Dorothy said. "My mother's in Reno, see, and while she's establishing residence my drama coach is Head Disciplinarian and Chairman of the Board combined."

I thought some more and came up with an answer. "There's a drainpipe a short ways up the beach," I said. "It's a big pipe and this time of year there isn't any water in it. If you're not afraid of maybe getting your clothes a little dirty—"

"Sandals, shorts, and sweater?" They're expendable," she said.

Sure enough, that turned out to be what she had on. It was funny that I hadn't noticed them before. I must have been concentrating on her face. Her face was—you know, angelic? She had black hair, and the way the sun hit it made it look as though there was a halo perched on top.

"So you go down to the beach," I said. "Crawl through the drainpipe and wait for me on the other side. That's one place nobody will think to look for you. Okay?"

"Like it's a deal," she said.

That's beat talk, that "like" jive. You can't just say "okay." You got to say "like okay," and if you're real beat it's "like okay, man." I never went for it, being a—you know, purist?—and anyway it's sort of dated now. But coming from Dorothy I got to admit it sounded cute.

I watched her climb out and walk towards her own gate. Then I swung the Sprite in a U-turn and drove up to the market. I left it in the parking lot and went into the liquor department of the Mayfair. There were bottles of scotch lined up on the shelves on my right. I took one and carried it to the man behind the counter. I gave him Mrs. Bennett's hundred-dollar bill.

"Got a bag to put the bottle in?" I asked.

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He didn't move, just stood there studying the bill. At last he looked at me. "I.D." he said.

"Come again?"

"Let's see your identification. I got to know how old you are."

"Look." I set the bottle on the counter. "It's not for me. I'm buying it for a lady, Mrs. Bennett. She—"

He broke in. "Mrs. Phyllis Bennett?"

"That's right," I said. "She lives—"

"I know where she lives. Sorry, but I can't sell you liquor. If you'll wait a minute I'll call Mrs. Bennett and explain."

He got a phone book and started looking for the number. The bill was lying in front of me where he'd put it down. I put it in my pocket. It was Mrs. Bennett's money and I had to see that it got back to her intact. He dialed the number he had found.

I got restless, waiting. Mr. Wurley's class was the first period after the lunch hour. I might be able to alibi not having any paper finished enough to hand in, but at least I had to make the class on time. And there was Dorothy waiting for me in the drainpipe—

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Don't she answer?"

"No," he said. "You sure she's at home?"

"She was a few minutes ago, and she didn't look as if she was going anywhere," I said.

He shrugged and kept on listening to nothing on the phone. I said, "Forget the whole deal, please," and started to leave. He said something about holding on a minute because there was a question or two he'd like to ask, but I made out as if I didn't hear.

I went out to the parking lot and got into the Sprite. I put the stick in what I thought was low-low, let in the clutch, and backed into a black-and-white job just behind me.

It turned out to be a Sheriff's car. Two deputies got out and walked towards me, both wearing that sort of sad, disillusioned look that deputy sheriffs seem to cultivate.

"Operator's license, kid," one of them said.

I handed it to him. He read it. "This your car?" he asked.

"No, sir. It belongs to Mrs. Phyllis Bennett. I was running an errand—"

"Registration."

I fished it out of the side pocket. He looked it over, gave it back. He looked at the front license tag and called out the number to the other deputy.

"Ring any sort of bell?"

"Not on the list." The other deputy stopped staring at me long enough to shake his head.

The first deputy wrote me out a ticket. "Next time you'll be more careful, won't you, boy?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Couldn't you just—?"

I was going to point out that,

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after all, I hadn't hurt his car and ask him to go easy on me, my driver's license being practically virginal and all, but as he handed me the ticket I saw a complication headed in our direction and I changed my mind. The complication was the man from the liquor department. He was coming straight towards us and I foresaw a whole career ahead of me just answering questions. I put the ticket in my pocket and got out of the parking lot.

I drove straight back to Mrs. Bennett's and left the Sprite where I had parked before. I went through the gate, and the three steps, and through the door. Mrs. Bennett was lying on the couch. "So that's why she didn't answer the phone," I thought. "She passed out."

Then I saw the hole in her head where the bullet had gone in and knew that this particular pass-out was going to be permanent. She was dead.

My heart started banging and my knees got rubbery, and there was a time—I don't know how long it lasted—when I went here and there and back and forward, expending a lot of energy but not getting much of anything constructive done. I started for Mrs. Bennett. I thought I'd better feel her pulse or maybe hold a mirror over her face to see if she was breathing, but it didn't take a mirror to tell me that she wasn't and to know she didn't even have a pulse.

So I stumbled over to the telephone. I picked it up, and then I put it down because I didn't know whether to call the Emergency Hospital or the Sheriff's office first. So I ran into the patio intending to find one of the neighbors and pass the buck to him, but thinking about the neighbors reminded me that Dorothy was one of them and that she was waiting in the drainpipe. So I stopped again, just inside the gate.

While I was standing there, feeling numb and not thinking clear but sort of hazy, I heard this car pull up. There was a hole in the gate with a little cover to it that you could push aside. Like a spy-hole? I took a quick look through it and reacted automatically to what I saw. Before those same two disillusioned deputies had time even to start knocking on the gate, I was down on the beach and the drainpipe was rapidly coming up. This pipe is maybe a hundred yards long. It runs underneath the highway and the other end is inland from the beach. I was out of breath when I got to the other end.

It was pretty there. I came out in a gully that had trees on both sides and even a little grass and such. I couldn't see any houses, which was fine. But I couldn't see Dorothy either, and that wasn't. I looked all around and she wasn't anywhere in sight.

"Dorothy?" I called.

The answer came from above me on the south side of the gully.

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"Here." I looked up but all I could see was this eucalyptus tree.

"Where?"

"In the tree."

That's where she was, too. Ordinarily a eucalyptus is one of the hardest trees there is to climb, but this one happened to have a branch that was only about ten feet above the ground. She was sitting on it. I climbed the side of the gully and shinnied up the tree and sat beside her.

"Jane climb tree good," I said when my breath finally came back.

"Jane learn climb tree in Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer jungle. Jane climb up, see when Tarzan come back in Sprite."

I looked where she was looking and, sure enough, I could see the Sprite parked outside Mrs. Bennett's gate across the highway. The Sheriff's car was right behind it. Just seeing that black-and-white job gave me the shivers. It came to me all of a sudden—everything I'd done wrong. I hadn't exactly been a moron. I'd been a stupid moron, which is worse. Instead of explaining things to that liquor department man I'd turned his suspicions to super-suspicions by walking out on him. And of course he'd unloaded on the cops.

A kid drives up in a cool sports car, tries to buy liquor and to pay for it with a C-note, and the lady he says he's doing it for doesn't answer the telephone—well, that'd make anybody give the kid a second look. Brother! I could just see those two deputies over in Mrs. Bennett's house. I knew what they were thinking. One of them was probably making a phone call right this minute.

"It was the Bostwick boy, all right," I could hear him saying. "He murdered her and took off with a hundred bucks. Send out an all-points bulletin. Advise caution when approaching. This criminal is desperate and probably he's armed."

And right there on the phone that he was holding, life-size and in living color, *I could see my fingerprints!*

"I'm in a jam, Dorothy," I said.

"So brief me."

I filled her in on the details.

Naturally she was shocked. But after a while she accepted the fact that Mrs. Bennett had been murdered and stopped talking about her and started thinking about me. "They can't pin it on you, George. You didn't kill her," she said.

"I know that, but the cops don't. You ever hear of circumstantial evidence? It's the only really reliable evidence there is."

"Cops may rely on it. I don't."

"I'm afraid that's—you know, immaterial?" I said.

"It won't be when I tell them what I know. Her husband did it—Max," she said. "I'd been sitting in this tree, oh, maybe three, four minutes, when I saw him coming through the drainpipe. He buried something just this side of it. Then

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he sort of slunk over to the highway and a woman came along and picked him up."

I said, "Max Bennett's in Las Vegas. With his so-called secretary. His wife—his late wife, that is—told me."

"I don't believe that for a minute. Maybe that's what he told Phyllis, but I know better. He's not the kind of man would take his secretary to Vegas. And I tell you I just saw him, George!"

"Was the woman who picked him up a red-head?"

"I couldn't tell. She was inside the car. But Max was right down there." She pointed. "I couldn't have made a mistake!"

"What's he look like?"

"Well," she said, "he's tall and real distinguished. He's only thirty-three but he's got this hair like graying at the temples. Like, you know, worldly?"

I said, "I just can't see it. Such a distinguished type and all, why would he want to murder his own wife?"

"If you'd known Phyllis, really known her, you wouldn't have to ask. She was a succubus," Dorothy said.

"A which?"

"Like in a dream there's this evil woman?"

"Well, it takes all kinds," I said. "What did Mr. Bennett bury?"

"Let's go see," she said.

We unclimbed the tree and slid down into the gully. Sure enough, the ground was loose in a spot near the drainpipe that Dorothy pointed out. I could dig into it with my hands. I scooped it out and, only a few inches down, I felt something cold and hard. It was an automatic, a Smith & Wesson .38. I gave it the standard procedure, sniffing the muzzle, counting the cartridges in the clip. One bullet had recently been fired.

"You called it right, Dorothy. This is what killed her," I said.

"I've seen that gun before. It's Max's. You realize what this means, George? You're in the clear. Hot-diggity!" she said.

"Hot what?"

"Like it's the most," she said.

I didn't say anything for a while. I was thinking. I guess I was thinking harder than I'd ever thought in my whole life. "I wish you'd got the license number of that car," I said at last. "We'd have a pretty good case if you'd remembered to do that."

"I did get it! Wait a minute—" She concentrated. "It was a California license—SHM 578. Isn't that enough for you to take to the police?"

"Well, not quite," I said. "They'd have to check a lot of things, and all the time they were doing it I'd be in jail. I'm supposed to be in Mr. Wurley's class at one o'clock."

"Who's Mr. Wurley?"

I told her, and about the paper I hadn't even started writing yet. "But if you'll help me," I said, "I

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got an idea that ought to make the cops and Mr. Wurley happy, both."

"I'll be glad to help you, George. Just tell me what to do," she said.

So that's how come we're sitting in this booth in The Top o' the Sea Café on Malibu Pier. We got here the easy way—just walked along the highway until we came to it. Nobody stopped us. Lots of people looked at us, but it was only Dorothy they saw.

Jack Levin runs this place. He's a friend of Freddie's, and he let us have some coffee and gave me this writing paper and loaned me his fountain pen. I'd have offered to pay for the coffee but the only money I have is this hundred-dollar bill, and I'm holding that as evidence.

So, Mr. Wurley, here's the paper I was supposed to do *plus* my alibi for not showing up today. I don't dare go anywhere until the cops arrest the murderer. Dorothy has promised to bring this to you, but I don't think she'll read it. Who reads the literary efforts of a high school senior unless, like you do, they get paid for it? I'm pretty sure she'll give it to you. It's what the innocent juvenile non-delinquent she's playing today would do.

But don't forget that lovable young innocence is only one of a lot of parts she's played in her time. Remember her in *Teen-Age Terrorist?* She's versatile. And old, Mr. Wurley. She's been a sub-ingenue for lo, these many years, and she must be twenty-five if she's a minute.

It's what she said when I found the murder weapon that finally blasted off my brain and sent it into orbit. Nobody's said "Hot-diggity!" since I grew up. So, after that, when she told me that the license number of the car that picked up Mr. Bennett was SHM 578, it was all daylight and champagne, like Shakespeare says.

You see, that's the number of the sports car that Mrs. Bennett drives. I ought to know. The deputy wrote it on the ticket he gave me and the ticket's in my pocket. What happened was—she'd been watching the Sprite and SHM 578 was the first number that came to her. You know, subconsciously?

So what I'd advise you to do, Mr. Wurley, is to think up some excuse to keep her waiting while you call the cops. Because she did it. You only have to listen to her talk about him to know she's got a thing on Mr. Bennett, and that's why she killed his wife.

She must have been outside the gate while I was telling Mrs. Bennett about my being first-string tackle and all, and inside the patio when Mrs. Bennett asked me to run up to the Mayfair Market for her. Anyway, when I came out she had her routine down pat. After I started for the market she went in the house and shot Mrs. Bennett with Mr. Bennett's gun.

The cops will find my finger-

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prints on it, and probably nobody else's—remember, I dug it out of the drainpipe. I'll say this much for Dorothy—she's smart. She's pretty, too, and if you don't look too close you'd never notice those little lines at the corners of her eyes.

One more thing. Chances are that Mr. Bennett really is in Las Vegas. Anyway, he's certainly nowhere near Malibu. If there'd been the slightest chance of anybody thinking that he might have done it, Dorothy would never have told me that she'd seen him. Last thing she wants is to have Mr. Bennett put in jail.

And of course she never had any intention of telling the cops the same story she told me. That was going to be something I had just dreamed up. For publicity or something, to drag her name into it when all she was doing was doing me a favor, taking my paper into class.

Wherever Mr. Bennett is, I don't know whether they'll find his secretary with him or not. Or care. That's his business and if the cops want to make it so, it's theirs. My business is somehow to get off the hook. So will you get me off, sir, please?

And how's about it, Mr. Wurley, do I pass?

IN MEMORIAM——William O'Farrell died on April 11, 1962 at the age of 57. He was a fine novelist and short-story writer—his *Over There—Darkness* was awarded the Mystery Writers of America "Edgar" as the best mystery short story published during 1958; and every story by Mr. O'Farrell that has appeared in EQMM has been distinguished. *A Paper for Mr. Wurley,* in this issue, is probably the last short story that William O'Farrell wrote before his death—and it is one of his finest. William O'Farrell will be missed . . .

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EDITORS' FILE CARD

AUTHOR: **NORMAN DANIELS**

TITLE: ***A Funeral for Patrolman Cameron***

TYPE: Human Interest Cop Story

LOCALE: United States

TIME: The Present

COMMENTS: *If this story doesn't get under your skin, if it doesn't tug at your heartstrings, if it doesn't make you feel angry and sad and—yes, proud . . .*

CAPTAIN MCDERMOTT, IN CHARGE of Headquarters between the hours of eight a.m. and four p.m., rarely found moments when he was alone in the big main office behind the long, bar-like desk. This was one of them, and he was idly wondering what to buy Mabel, his wife of twenty-seven years, for her birthday. He liked to give it considerable thought because he never had too much to spend and this year he wanted something special.

He heard the sharp, attention-getting cough and looked up. He could see clear to the open main door and there was nobody in sight; but then, as he kept looking, because he could hear the scuffle of feet, a small blond-topped head slowly raised itself above the level of the desk. A pair of very bright, very serious, and thoroughly unfrightened blue eyes looked across the desk and straight at him in as disconcerting a manner as Mabel could summon when she was angry.

Captain McDermott got up slowly and walked around the desk. The boy had hoisted himself up so that he stood on tiptoe with his chin resting against the edge of the brass rail that protruded from the desk.

"Well, now," McDermott said, "how can I help you?"

The voice may have been small, but it was firm. "I want to see the Chief of Police."

"Suppose you tell me why," McDermott said. "And while you're

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at it, come on around so I can see what you look like."

The boy went behind the desk with no hesitation. McDermott guessed his age as about nine. A sturdy, if not large, youngster, clean and well dressed—as well as any boy his age can be. His shoes were scuffed, which was normal; there was a large soiled mark on one sleeve of his coat, but a boy's arms get into the craziest places; and his hair needed combing though perhaps no comb on earth could have curried that unruly mane.

"Now," McDermott said, "what's it all about?"

"Officer Clarence Cameron, sir."

"Cameron?" McDermott wondered what this boy could have to do with an old cop like Cameron who had died only yesterday.

"Yes, sir. You see, I go to Lakeside School and Officer Cameron—he was the traffic cop there—and I'm on Safety Patrol and I worked with Officer Cameron. Well, my mother told me he died yesterday and I want to know if he's going to have a big funeral."

McDermott was no more startled than if he'd been asked how many miles it is to the moon. Which he'd been asked more than once.

"Sit down, son," he said. "First of all, what's your name?"

"Jason Palmer, sir."

"Good. Where do you live and with whom?"

"225 White Street, sir, and I live with my mother. My father's in the Navy, sir, and he's been away a long time. I dunno what he's doing, but it's got something to do with geo . . . geodetic . . . survey?"

"That might be it. Okay, now we have those details attended to, tell me why you think Officer Cameron is going to have a big funeral."

"On account of he rates it."

McDermott nodded. "Undoubtedly. He was a very good friend of mine. Still, I'd like to know how come a funeral—even for a nice guy like Cameron—is of interest to a boy like you."

"He was my friend too and he did traffic duty at my school for twenty-seven years. He told me, and he said nobody ever got hurt there. Not once."

"Well, that's probably true. He was a fine officer."

"He sure was and that's why he oughta have an Inspector's funeral."

"A what?" McDermott gasped, then caught himself. "Yes . . . yes, I know what you mean. We—ah—don't have an Inspector's funeral here, Jason. The department's not big enough to have an Inspector."

"What're you?"

"I'm a Captain."

"Okay. Is he gonna have a Captain's funeral?"

"Now, Jason," McDermott said, "I'm beginning to understand what you're driving at. You think Cameron was a fine officer and he ought to have a big funeral."

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"Sure. Like all the heroes. In New York a cop shot it out with some bandits. He killed two of them and he got killed himself, so they gave him an Inspector's funeral."

"I read about that. He was a very brave man."

"Sure. And I read about another cop who shot a man who was holding a woman prisoner. Only the cop got killed too."

"Yes, I remember the case."

"Does a cop have to kill somebody to be a hero?"

McDermott wondered what ever happened to the kids who were too scared to walk into a police station and whose parents used to make bogeymen out of cops.

"That's quite a question, Jason. I don't know. But still . . . those officers *were* heroes."

"So was Officer Cameron. He never let anybody get killed or hurt. I guess that makes him a hero . . . kinda . . . I guess he didn't make much noise like shooting, and he didn't kill anybody, but he was sure a hero."

"In a way," McDermott conceded. "Yes, in a quiet sort of way he was a hero, I suppose. But . . . I'm afraid he won't get an Inspector's funeral, son. Not even a Captain's. Oh, it'll very likely be a big one because he had a lot of friends . . ."

"But all the cops won't march?"

"No."

Jason Palmer rubbed one eye with his knuckles and thus smeared some foreign substance on his cheek.

"I wanna see the Chief of Police," he said.

"But you can't, Jason. He's home and he's sick. He can't see anyone. Now—about school . . ."

"Okay, okay, I'm not playing hookey. I'll just be a little late, that's all."

"You run along now. I like your ideas, Jason. They're very kind and unselfish. I wish I could help you."

"You think Officer Cameron oughta have a Captain's funeral, sir?"

"Indeed I do."

"Should I ask the principal of my school? He's—well, kind of a stinker, I guess, but if I asked him . . ."

"You have the right to ask anyone, Jason. But if you don't get back to school, there'll be all sorts of trouble."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"That's all right. I'm glad you dropped in."

The boy walked out carefully, but broke into a run as soon as he reached the street.

"Just like a taxpayer," McDermott said to himself. "Only *he* knows what he wants."

The telephone started a short, busy spurt and it was after two o'clock when the principal of Jason's school called on the phone.

"Captain McDermott," he said, "this is Principal Harris of the—"

"I know, Mr. Harris," McDermott interrupted. "You couldn't

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possibly be calling about anyone except a boy named Jason Palmer."

"He came into my office with the most fantastic idea—"

"What did you actually think of it, Mr. Harris?"

"Impractical, juvenile . . . but interesting. No one but a child could possibly have thought of it. He told me you said it was all right for him to ask me—and that you approve of the idea."

"I do—but it can't be done," McDermott said.

"Cameron wasn't a—well, a spectacular sort of policeman, was he?"

"Not spectacular in any way except his devotion to duty. No, he didn't rate any medals and he won't get a hero's funeral, but I've seen worse cops."

"I told Jason the faculty would send a floral tribute. He was not impressed."

"No, he wouldn't be. But that's all there'll be to it, Mr. Harris. Only one small boy has been disillusioned, and he'll get over it."

"Yes, I suppose so. Thank you, Captain."

McDermott hung up and attended to the booking of a drunk carried in on a stretcher. He knew him. He thought he knew all the drunks on earth. After that there were bail bonds to arrange, pedigrees to be taken, reports to be read, beat assignments to be made.

At three the phone rang and Chief Bradley was on the wire, speaking with the croak he always developed when he had a bad cold.

"There's some kid here says you sent him. Mac, what's it all about? He talks of Cameron's funeral, but he doesn't make much sense to me and anyway I feel so lousy . . ."

"I know the boy," McDermott said. "He was here. I told him you couldn't see anyone, but he's quite a persistent tyke. I'll explain the whole thing when you feel better."

"Well, he's camped on my front porch. Kid like him belongs in school. Send a car for him. He walked all the way from the center of town. Imagine that? I used to walk it every night on my beat, but I couldn't do it now."

"I'll send a car," McDermott said. "I'll personally take him home and read a mild riot act to him. Tell him to sit tight."

"I couldn't pry him off my porch with a crowbar. Send a car right away, before I find myself listening to him and then *I'll* be in trouble."

McDermott rang for a driver and sent him to the chief's house with orders to bring the boy back. It would be around four by the time they returned. McDermott decided he'd better put a firm end to Jason's "idea."

He had changed to civilian clothes by the time the car brought Jason in. McDermott clambered into the back. Jason sat up front with the driver, somewhat nervously but quite defiantly. He wasn't beaten.

"Hi, Jason," McDermott said.

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"You were wrong in going to see the Chief."

"Yes, sir. You told me not to, but I went anyhow. My mom says I'm as stubborn as my dad who's in the Navy and I guess she's right."

"I'm going to take you home now and have a little talk with your mother. Do you mind?"

"No, sir. I been trying to make her understand too, but she don't seem to neither. *Nobody* does—well, maybe you do. I *think* you do, but nobody else."

"I think I do too. In fact, the more I think about Officer Cameron, the more I think you're right, but—well, I think further than you, Jason, and I see how impossible it is."

"Why should it be, that's what I'd like to know. Gosh . . . if a guy has to kill somebody and get killed himself to be a hero, I sure don't want to be no hero."

McDermott said, "Do you get the drift of this, Brophy?"

The driver shook his head. "No, Captain, I don't figure it."

"Keep your ears open and you'll get an education when Jason is around!"

"Yeah," Brophy said, "I got two boys of my own. You ain't telling me something I don't know. But this kid seems a little deeper somehow."

The police car pulled up before a neat two-story, one-family house on a street where it was one of a row of two dozen others just like it. The police car drew all the kids in the neighborhood.

Jason got out of the car and walked rather proudly, with McDermott towering over him. His mother opened the door and some of Jason's assurance left him.

"Is he in trouble?" she asked, eying the official car and the uniformed driver.

"No, ma'am," McDermott said. "I'm Captain McDermott. Jason came to have a little talk about his pal, Officer Cameron. I think your son is a remarkable boy, Mrs. Palmer. That's why I brought him home myself—to tell you so."

"Do you really think so, Captain? I try very hard to keep Jason from doing anything wrong—his father's away so much . . ."

"Let me tell you something, Mrs. Palmer. Jason has ideas that are much wiser than lots of people I know. He believes Officer Cameron was a hero, and he thinks Cameron deserves the send-off of a hero. I agree with him. It's impossible and maybe even a little—well, absurd. But I agree with your son and I'm very happy he thought enough of his idea to follow it through."

"Thank you," she said. She was a rather attractive woman, this mother of Jason. The lad had her eyes and he had the cut of her jaw too. McDermott was glad he didn't have to argue any point with this woman—not concerning her son, anyway.

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"Well, so long, Jason," McDermott said. "And good luck."

"Thank you." Jason suddenly came to life—came out of the lethargy he'd fallen into when his prospects had seemed to dwindle.

Later, McDermott told himself he should have known. To wish good luck to a boy with only one idea on his mind is tantamount to encouraging him to go ahead with it.

The Captain got the phone call around ten thirty the next morning. He was busy—police court had adjourned for the day and all the bookkeeping from that procedure had to be done: two prisoners, each with a mittimus, to be sent to jail; bonds to return; possessions to be given back to those who'd been locked up overnight.

McDermott didn't like being disturbed with all this routine work on his hands and he usually let Sergeant Anders handle other details. But a call from the Mayor's office wasn't a detail.

"This is Loomis, the Mayor's secretary, Captain."

"Hello, Mr. Loomis," McDermott said with forced heartiness. He didn't like Loomis, and when it came right down to it, he didn't like the Mayor either. Lots of people didn't. One of the two daily local newspapers had been blasting the Mayor for months.

Loomis had a nasty edge to his voice. "Do you know a boy named Jason Palmer?"

"Oh, my gosh, don't tell me . . ."

"He's here and the Mayor is raising the roof. The boy got in to see him and—well, I'll explain when you get down here."

"When I get down there?"

"You heard me. And get here fast. Take this kid off our hands. He won't budge. He says he's got certain rights or . . . something. Anyway, come over here and *get* him. Take him back to school, turn him over to the truant officer—do something!"

"I'll be right over," McDermott said.

"You'd better. I don't like your friends, Captain. This one especially. He bites."

"Now, listen," McDermott roared, "if you pushed that boy around . . ."

"*Will* you get over here? Can't you get it through your head that the Mayor is your Commander-in-Chief?"

McDermott snorted, but he hung up and buttoned his uniform jacket and got his cap from the locker in his office. It was a short walk to City Hall.

Loomis was a rotund man with a red complexion, but now his face was fiery with rage. Seated beside the secretary's desk, swinging his feet nonchalantly, sat Jason. He managed a sickly smile for McDermott's benefit. Spread on Loomis' desk was another cause for his anger. An early edition of the *Globe-Dispatch* called the Mayor "a per-

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fection of inefficiency"—part of their long-running campaign against him.

"You get this boy out of here, Captain, and if you ever send anyone like him here again . . ."

"He didn't send me," Jason said mildly.

"You keep out of it. You've had your say." The secretary transferred his attention and fury to McDermott. "I tell you, the Mayor is really upset. This boy walked in and sat down beside a ward heeler—I mean," he hastily corrected himself, "an aspirant for alderman in next month's election. This man had an appointment with His Honor and when he was called into the office, this boy simply walked in with him. I thought they were father and son—"

"No-o-o," McDermott said smoothly. "His father's a naval officer, not a ward heeler. Big difference."

"No matter. Now take this boy home and lecture his parents. Then notify the principal of his school about what has happened. He really should be arrested."

"The principal?"

"No, damn it, the boy!"

"What for, Mr. Loomis? Isn't the Mayor the servant of the people?"

"He is far too busy a man to be bothered with . . . what was it? Some funeral?"

"I'm afraid you wouldn't understand," McDermott said. As he spoke, he folded the newspaper idly and held it in his hand. "I doubt the Mayor would and, as you say, he's too important to talk to a boy. Jason, we'll be leaving now."

"Yes, sir," Jason said. They walked out into the cool, marble-walled corridor. "I guess I didn't do very good, did I?"

"No, it seems you didn't."

"I'm sorry. I'll go home now. Boy, mom's gonna make a fuss. I played hookey."

"Well, you did have legitimate business with the Mayor."

"I sure didn't get far. I had to tell him three times what I wanted because he couldn't understand me. I wouldn't vote for him. He's kinda dumb."

"Some call him worse names than that. I can't give you a ride home, Jason. I walked over from the office."

"Aw, that's all right. Boy, I got myself into a mess this time all right. And it didn't do any good. Nobody listens. Nobody cares about Officer Cameron and honest, the cops just *gotta* march at his funeral. They gotta tell everybody he was a fine cop."

"If things get too rough, let me know, Jason. I'm your friend."

"Yeah, I know that all right. But we can't do much, can we?"

"Not a great deal sometimes, and then again, sometimes we can. You see, it's hard for people to understand why an ordinary policeman, who does his job for forty-odd years and does it well, isn't a

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hero. As you say, everyone seems to think heroes are made only in a hail of bullets."

"Nothing more I can do," Jason said, biting his lips.

"Not unless you can shout it from the rooftops, Jason."

Jason kicked at a politician's fat cigar butt on the marble floor. "Gosh, how's a guy to do that? Heck, nobody'd even hear me."

"Well, when I say rooftops, I'm being—well, symbolic, sort of. Know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess so."

"If people hear about it, read about it . . . well . . . if I try to help, I'll be in trouble. So we have to part company, Jason."

They went down the wide red-brick stairs outside City Hall. At the bottom McDermott handed Jason the folded newspaper he'd taken from the Mayor's office.

"You can read this on your way home," he said. "You ought to enjoy what they say about the Mayor. This newspaper doesn't like him. They don't like him so much they're very friendly with anyone else who doesn't like him. Now me, I'm a public official and I can't take sides, but a newspaper can. So long, Jason—and Jason?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Don't stop fighting."

"Yes, sir," Jason said.

The boy walked down the street—a small, apparently unimportant little figure of what some day would be a man. He was stopped by a red traffic light and he unfolded the newspaper and scanned it. Then he forgot about crossing the street and turned the corner instead. He was moving fast.

McDermott sighed deeply and went back to the police station. He had a notion that it might be an interesting afternoon.

When Captain McDermott, in his best uniform, rang the bell of Jason's home the next day, it was Jason who let him in, somewhat wide-eyed.

"Oh, boy," he said, "I guess I'm gonna be arrested."

Jason's mother invited McDermott in. On the living-room table lay the late evening edition of yesterday's *Globe-Dispatch*. The front page had temporarily omitted the international headlines. There were no photographs of car crashes, no studio shots of movie stars announcing another divorce, nothing from Washington, Paris, London, or Moscow.

There were three pictures. The middle one was a fine shot of Jason; it was flanked by a photograph of his father in Navy uniform and of Patrolman Clarence Cameron, also in uniform.

The story, told in large type, was the one Jason had related to a sympathetic editor who had a political bone to pick with the incumbent administration. But there was more than mere political badgering in this story. McDermott had read it

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four times and it was easy to tell that someone else had understood Jason.

"Did this get you into trouble, Captain?" Mrs. Palmer asked. "I'm dreadfully sorry if it did."

"No, ma'am," McDermott said. "No trouble. I'm here on official business. I'm here to tell you that Patrolman Clarence Cameron has been cited for meritorious duty as befits a man who guarded thousands of school kids in his career and always had a kindly word for each one of them—and most of whom are grown up now and hollering their heads off."

"They're going to give him a—an Inspector's funeral?"

"You might call it that, ma'am. Of course the Chief of Police, the Mayor—everybody had ideas about honoring Cameron all along and it was only the fault of subordinates that Jason never got to see the big shots—I'm sorry, I refer to the Mayor mostly. This is known as passing the buck and I'm grateful I had nothing to do with it."

Mrs. Palmer smiled. "I rather think you had quite a lot to do with it, Captain. Jason has told me . . ."

"Well, that's neither here nor there. I dropped by to pick up your son. He's riding with us—in the first car."

"You're taking me?" Jason said in a shrilly excited voice.

"See this badge?" McDermott brushed it reverently. "It's made of gold, but if I show up without you, Jason, tomorrow it'll be tin. And we've got to hurry. Every man on the force—or almost all, we had to leave a skeleton force on duty—is ready to start marching."

Jason whirled and pounded up the stairs with an ear-splitting din.

"Hold on," McDermott called out, "we've got to leave."

"I forgot something," Jason called.

"Thank you, Captain," Mrs. Palmer said. "This means so much to Jason."

"He rates it," McDermott said crisply. "More important, Patrolman Cameron rates it."

Jason raced down the stairs just as noisily, avoiding breaking a leg or his neck by some miracle of Providence watching over excited boys. He paid no attention to where his feet landed. He was too busy buckling on the slightly soiled, white Sam Browne belt and armband proclaiming him a member of the school traffic patrol.

He looked up at McDermott very seriously.

"I forgot my uniform," he said.

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IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

. . . "Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine" is now bigger and better than ever—32 extra pages *in every issue,* at the new price of 50 cents per copy. These *32 added pages every month* will bring you the highest possible quality of mystery fiction—from stories of pure detection (amateur, armchair, and official) and probing studies of crime (psychological, psychiatric, and Robin Hoodish) to tours de force of suspense, surprise, and even the supernatural.

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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

The Mystery Writers of America and the Crime Writers Association of London differ sharply as to which was 1962's best suspense novel. MWA picks Ellis Peters' DEATH AND THE JOYFUL WOMAN (Crime Club, $2.95); CWA selects Joan Fleming's WHEN I GROW RICH (Washburn, $3.50); and neither mentions the other's choice even among the runners-up. You can't lose by following either guide; both books are excellent.

★★★★ **THE TROUBLE MAKERS, *by Celia Fremlin*** (Lippincott, $3.50)

Miss Fremlin's best study in quiet domestic terror since the unforgettable THE HOURS BEFORE DAWN (1956).

★★★★ **THE SHERLOCK HOLMES COMPANION, *by Michael and Mollie Hardwick*** (Doubleday, $4.95)

Witty, graceful, infectious guide to Holmes, Watson and Doyle, recommended strongly to both the specialist and the general reader.

★★★★ **UNTIMELY RIPPED, *by Mark McShane*** (Crime Club, $3.50)

Author of last year's striking SEANCE repeats with a comparably offtrail and powerful study in psychopathic obsession.

★★★ **SMITH AND JONES, *by Nicholas Monsarrat*** (Sloane, $3.50)

Brief and pointed novel of intrigue and defection, with conclusion technically unmatched since Ellery Queen's THE FRENCH POWDER MYSTERY (1930).

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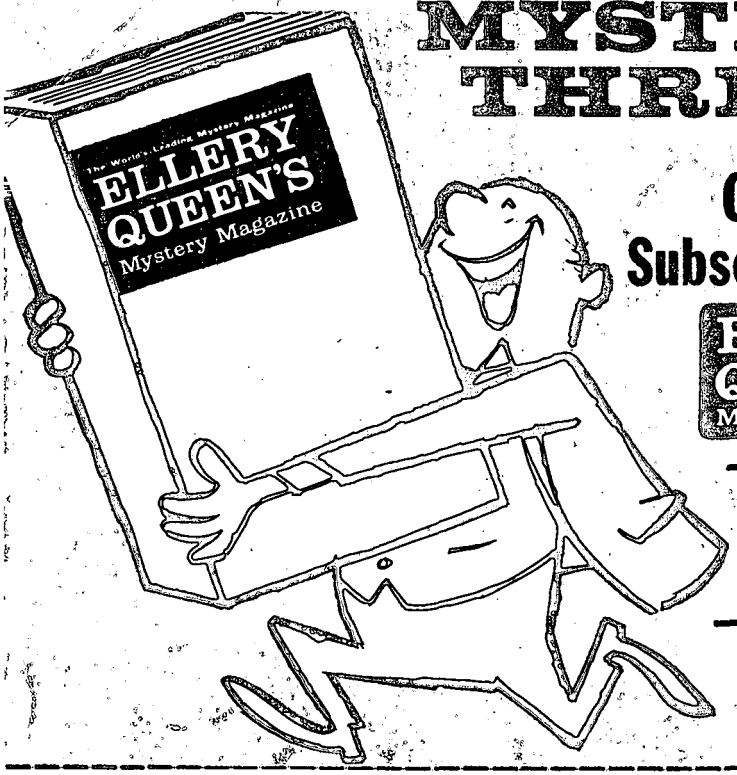

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